

Making Waves

Reflecting the current state of ocean reporting and exploring opportunities for better storytelling

Image by Jennifer Adler, United States, 2023

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Introduction and Methodology



As our planet grapples with the escalating consequences of declining ocean health, the urgency for a unified global response has never been more apparent. Much action is needed in the collective effort for a healthier marine environment and the protection of ecosystems and livelihoods that depend on it. As a powerful driver of environmental issues onto the public agenda, media coverage of ocean stories often falls short in fostering a deeper understanding of why caring for the ocean means caring for people and the planet.

This study was developed by the Pulitzer Center to help underpin initiatives contributing to more impactful ocean storytelling. The main goals include:

- Establishing a baseline of knowledge across the organization to guide priorities on ocean reporting.
- Understanding how experts in various related fields perceive ocean reporting, key topics, and gaps in coverage and knowledge to understand how to best report on the issues.
- Identifying opportunities to increase coverage, build capacity, collaborate, and investigate both in reporting and public awareness.
- Pinpointing the central messages that need to be communicated around environmental and socioeconomic impacts and their drivers, taking underrepresented voices into consideration.
- Identifying key stakeholders and audiences and gauging public levels of knowledge and awareness while exploring ways to measure impact.
- Finding opportunities for engagement and network building.

The Ocean Reporting Network

The Pulitzer Center launched the Ocean Reporting Network (ORN) in 2023 to promote in-depth ocean-related journalism. Modeled after their Rainforest Investigations Network, ORN offers fellowships for experienced environmental journalists to focus on ocean issues for a year, providing financial support, training, and editorial help. ORN aims to enhance public awareness of oceanic challenges like global warming, pollution, and biodiversity loss by fostering global journalistic collaboration.

A mixed-methods study was designed to meet these goals, including qualitative and quantitative data collection, and a media mapping analysis. The qualitative research consisted of 11 in-depth interviews with representatives from academia, nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), public relations and communications agencies, and international and intergovernmental organizations. The experts participated in 60-minute exploratory interviews via video conference between January 30 and February 23, 2024. These marine biology and fisheries specialists, communications experts, economists, conservationists, and advocates have the ocean at the center of their work and are dedicated to researching and driving change in conservation, policy and sustainable practices, public engagement, climate justice, and ocean governance.

Graphic 1

Gender distribution and geographic distribution of experts' current region of work and/or extended experience. Sample (N)=11



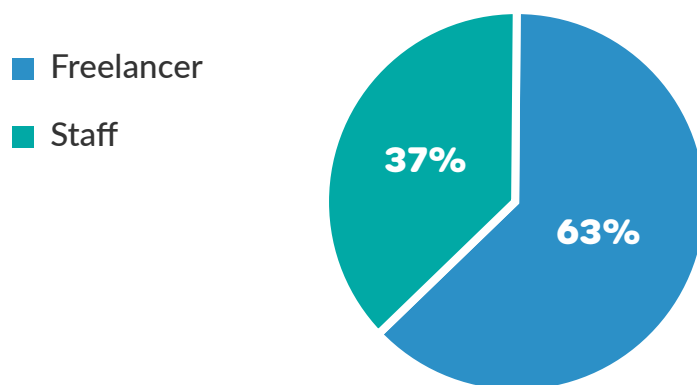
The quantitative research consisted of an online survey with a five-minute questionnaire available in English, Spanish, French, Portuguese, and Bahasa Indonesia.¹ Between February 27th and March 11th, 2024, journalists listed in an internal data bank were invited to participate in the study, which gathered their overall perception about coverage and knowledge of ocean issues, the challenges, topics, and audiences to be reached, and to identify some of the solutions to help improve ocean journalism.

The final sample consisted of 78 respondents from 30 countries. Nearly two out of three participants (63%) were freelancers, and 37% were part of an organization's staff. A significant proportion of the sample comes from North America (41%), and Europe is the region with the smallest representation (10%). In total, 77% of respondents had written a story about the ocean in the past, which indicates that interest in the subject could also have influenced the response rate.

Those stories vary from describing conservation efforts and community action via social entrepreneurship, to the environmental impact of climate change and overexploitation. They include public health and safety issues, innovative methods and data collection to advance scientific research, and territorial disputes involving fisherfolk and governments or big corporations. Some tackle the cultural and economic challenges of local communities affected both by exploration and conservation attempts. Others report illegal activities and crimes, and the socioenvironmental repercussions of conflicts in coastal areas.

¹ Survey questions can be accessed here: <https://docs.google.com/document/d/1pFRq8VAhLdfQljvFgvTYLbvdpdOgY9hoyeWG65nmsw/edit>

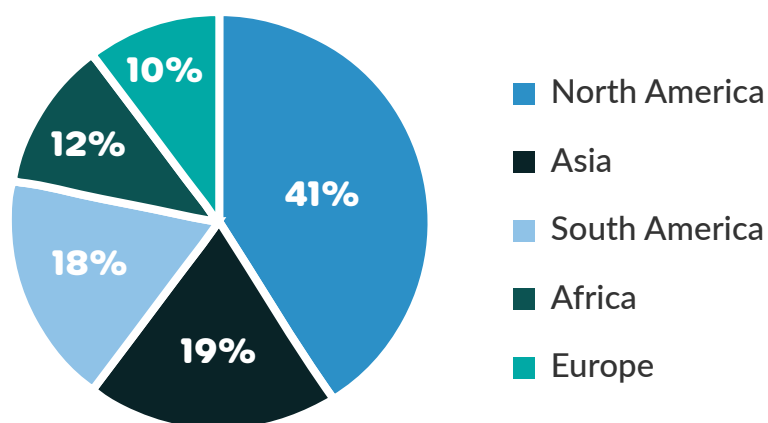
Graphic 2 | Employment status of the quantitative sample



Graphic 3 | Country distribution of the quantitative sample (Frequency)

United States	27		Nigeria	2		Pakistan	1	
Brazil	6		United Kingdom	2		Peru	1	
Indonesia	5		Venezuela	2		Philippines	1	
Germany	4		Chile	1		Sierra Leone	1	
Canada	3		Colombia	1		South Sudan	1	
China	2		Guatemala	1		Spain	1	
Ecuador	2		Iran	1		Tanzania	1	
India	2		Iraq	1		Faroe Islands	1	
Kenya	2		Malaysia	1		Uganda	1	
Mexico	2		Nepal	1		Ghana	1	

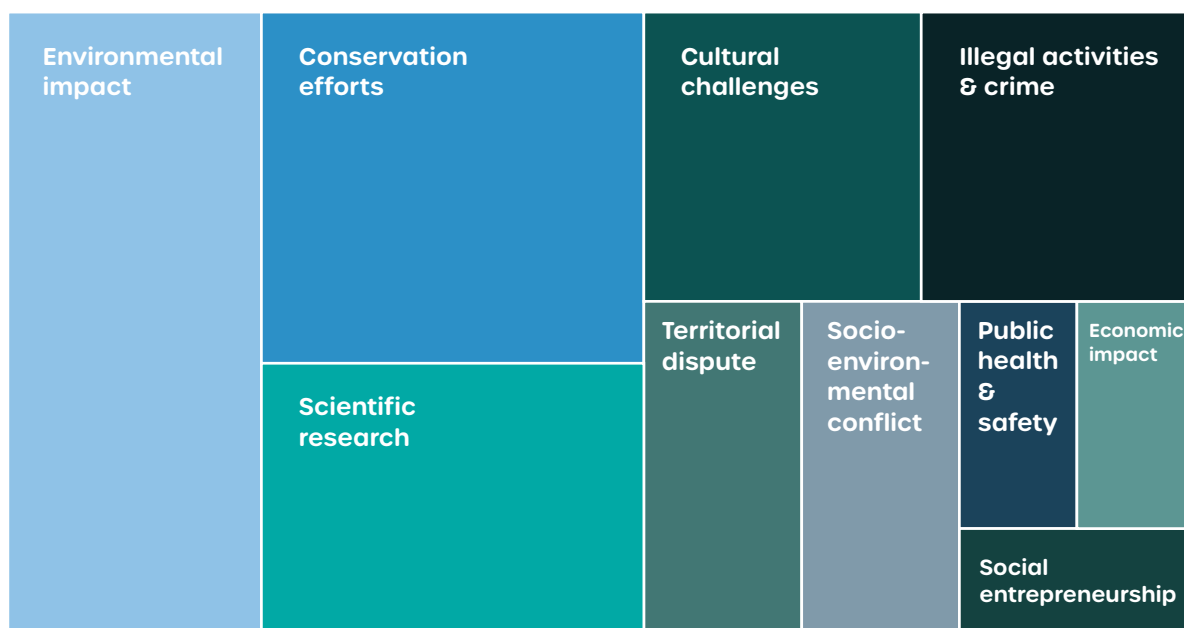
Graphic 4 | Continental distribution of quantitative sample (N=78)



Graphic 5 | Journalists in the survey who have written one or more stories about the ocean and the main region where that story took place. (N=78 journalists, 28 stories plotted)²



Graphic 6 | Overall topic of the stories provided by journalists with experience covering ocean issues (N=28 stories)



² From the 60 journalists that mentioned having written a story about the ocean, 28 shared links to the publications in the survey.

The media mapping study was conducted using media monitoring and social listening analysis tools to identify trends, influential content, narratives, and platforms that provide an overall picture of the digital conversation around ocean topics. Ocean-themed keywords based on subtopics such as global warming, pollution, biodiversity loss, among others, were selected and refined with the assistance of Brand24.³ Articles and social media posts were then Googled, and the Brand24 and BuzzSumo⁴ analysis enabled the monitoring of online mentions, reach, interactions, and sentiment for the established keywords, producing an overview of the potential engagement of the audience with the topic. The Brand24 analysis was conducted between December 2023 and March 2024, focusing on enhancing the list of keywords and gathering information about the online sentiment around the topic. The BuzzSumo analysis considered the period between March 2023 and March 2024 and provided insight into formats and types of narratives of ocean stories that have higher engagement potential.

Additionally, Media Cloud was used to estimate public interest by measuring the amount of news generated with ocean-related themes. Media Cloud is a tool that archives billions of news items in varying languages, permitting a search by keyword and an analysis of the volume of articles.⁵ The research encompassed news published between August 2022 and March 2024. The keywords were analyzed for total attention and attention over time given to the topics, as well as for top words in the content and a baseline analysis with topics that could provide a comparison parameter for the results within broader news trends (such as climate change and Ukraine).

Graphic 7 | Examples of keywords used in the media mapping study

ocean conservation coral reef
global warming coral reef degradation
marine life deep sea exploration
biodiversity loss marine conservation
ocean acidification marine debris

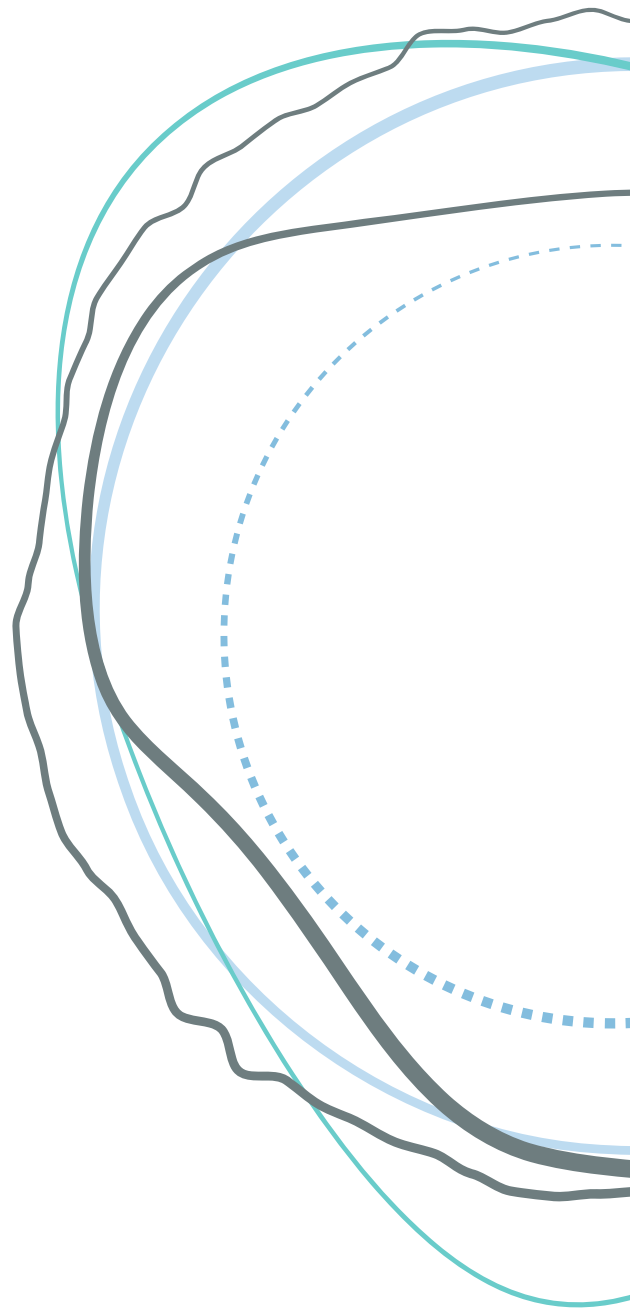
³ For more details on the Brand24 tool, see here: <https://brand24.com/>

⁴ For more details on the BuzzSumo tool, see here: <https://buzzsumo.com/>

⁵ For more details on the Media Cloud tool, see <https://www.mediacloud.org/>

1.1 Limitations

It is important to observe that the research approaches applied for this study do not encompass the reality of all the questions involving ocean conservation and the places and people it affects. Rather, it is an effort to map how ocean stories are being told and how accurate and engaging they seem to be, to provide the Pulitzer Center with actionable insight to better direct its resources and attention to the topic. However, it is crucial to recognize the fact that most of the research work was conducted in English due to the availability of information and resources, while a fair proportion of the underrepresented communities and voices that should be heard speak different languages. Employing varying research methods and making questionnaires or word searches available in some of these languages is an attempt to mitigate that shortfall, but this is still a complex landscape that requires further studies for a deeper understanding.



2

Key Insights

Within the perspective of improving journalistic coverage of ocean issues worldwide, 11 key insights can be drawn from this study.

1 CENTRAL MESSAGES

The role of the ocean in climate regulation and its interconnectedness with climate change needs to be emphasized. Reducing pollution and protecting biodiversity should be a priority. Informing audiences about the relationship of these issues with human well-being, social and environmental justice is key for engagement.

2 MEDIA COVERAGE SHORTCOMINGS

Despite the ocean's importance to planetary health, media coverage often lacks depth and fails to maintain public interest and awareness. Coverage tends to be reactive rather than proactive, with spikes around specific events but little sustained attention.

3 DIVERSE VOICES AND STORIES

It is essential to include underrepresented voices in ocean stories in order to cover environmental and socioeconomic impacts comprehensively. Local communities, Indigenous peoples, and grassroots organizations will help stories reflect a range of experiences and knowledge that will foster critical thinking about the issues in the public debate.

4 GAPS IN COVERAGE

Emerging issues such as deep-sea mining, the blue economy, and the socioeconomic impacts of marine conservation policies need more attention. There is a need for more stories that not only highlight problems but also focus on solutions, innovations, and community-led conservation efforts.

5 CONSISTENT AND IN-DEPTH COVERAGE

There is a need for more consistent and in-depth reporting on ocean issues to keep the public and policymakers continuously informed. Presenting a good story once can start a conversation, but failing to keep the discussion alive may also fail in provoking change. Strategies for ongoing coverage could help keep ocean issues at the forefront of public discourse.

6 SUPPORT FOR JOURNALISTS

Limited resources and ocean literacy hinder journalists from conducting in-depth, on-the-ground reporting. Providing reporters with education on marine issues, financial support, and technical support for data collection and analysis can enhance the quality of reporting.

7 ENGAGEMENT AND NETWORKING OPPORTUNITIES

Creating opportunities for engagement, such as workshops or collaborative projects between audiences and reporters, can help journalists increase their baseline knowledge about the issues, as well as their access to sources and stories. Collaborations with marine researchers, NGOs and international organizations can also lead to co-produced content, joint investigations, and shared resources, enhancing the credibility and reach of the stories.

8 PUBLIC AWARENESS AND LITERACY

The low level of ocean literacy among the audiences is an obstacle to the success of conservation initiatives. Identifying ways to gauge and increase public levels of knowledge and awareness about ocean issues is essential. Leveraging social media and powerful imagery can boost story reach and audience engagement.

9 TARGETED STORYTELLING FOR DIFFERENT AUDIENCES

Recognizing that different audiences require different narratives can help tailor stories to engage specific groups effectively, from policymakers to the general public. To avoid desensitizing audiences and inspire action, a balance between harrowing tales and solution-based stories is recommended.

10 MEASURING IMPACT

Exploring ways to measure the impact of ocean reporting, such as through audience engagement metrics or changes in policy, can help assess the effectiveness of journalistic efforts and guide future strategies.

11 GUIDING THE BLUE ECONOMY ACROSS ALL DIMENSIONS

Social challenges within this sphere must not be overlooked if sustainability goals — economic, environmental, and social — are to be attained. A fragmented and narrow perspective on sustainability will not suffice in ensuring the maximization of its benefits and the mitigation of its risks, including gender-related issues.





3

Context

3.1 Who Were Our Sources of Information?

While the study interviewees have different profiles, they are all highly qualified and experienced professionals who have in-depth knowledge and involvement with issues related to the ocean. Their perceptions and knowledge span diverse areas, from scientific research to strategic communication and environmental advocacy. The different characteristics of the qualitative sample can be summarized into two main profiles: the ocean specialists and the communicators.

Graphic 8 | Summary of interviewed experts' professional profiles

The Ocean Specialists

- Working on the conservation of threatened species
- Involved in the implementation of marine ecosystem projects
- Promoting sustainable fishing
- They are experts in ocean governance and climate change

Some interviewees have a doctorate in the topic they work on, such as fishing, the blue economy, and mining. Their expertise includes conserving endangered species, implementing marine ecosystem projects, and promoting sustainable fishing. There are also those with extensive experience in ocean governance and issues related to climate change, whose work involves collaborating with experts from different areas (such as ecology, economics, and psychology) to address complex challenges related to ocean sustainability. Their work is grounded in scientific evidence and interdisciplinary collaboration, aiming to manage ocean resources effectively and ensure ongoing benefits for future generations.

The Communicators

- Working in specialized agencies
- Leading campaigns related to the marine environment
- Supporting organizations by obtaining media coverage and funding for oceanic causes
- They are experts in identifying communication and audience engagement strategies

Other specialists have their professional careers focused on communicating about the ocean. They work in specialized agencies and/or on campaigns related to the marine environment. Their role involves helping organizations achieve their campaign objectives and gaining media coverage and securing funding for ocean communications projects. These professionals' expertise lies in identifying effective communication and public engagement strategies in order to promote greater awareness of the importance of protecting the ocean.

3.2 Ocean and Environment

When it comes to the relationship between the ocean and the environment, it is important to understand that the experts interviewed see the environment as an integrated set of dimensions that go beyond natural resources, fauna, and flora itself. The environment is understood as a fabric that weaves together environmental, social, political, and human dimensions. The ocean integrates with each and every one of these aspects in a way that affects and is affected by them.

Another important point is understanding and relating to the ocean from a transversal and integrated perspective. Conceiving the ocean as a singular, globalized, and interconnected whole and, above all, inverting the logic of divisions, since artificial barriers were arbitrarily created by humanity: That is a fundamental attitude when thinking and acting for ocean sustainability. The ocean faces a variety of challenges, but the fundamental obstacle is based on the fact that the ocean is understood as a separate dimension of the environment. When asked about possible bridges and connections between the ocean and nature, experts point out the a few main aspects:

- 1 The role of the ocean in carbon capture and its importance for the health of the environment: The ocean is the largest carbon sink on the planet. Through the process of absorbing carbon dioxide (CO₂) from the atmosphere, the ocean is crucial for mitigating climate change. This process, however, has many consequences, the main result being ocean acidification, which can have devastating impacts on marine life. Therefore, the health of the ocean is essential for the planet's environmental and climate balance.
- 2 The connection between the ocean and climate change, including the impacts of sea level rise and mitigation solutions: The ocean is intrinsically linked to climate change, both as a victim and part of the solution. Rising global temperatures cause glaciers and polar ice caps to melt, contributing to rising sea levels. This poses a direct threat to coastal communities around the world. Additionally, the ocean absorbs additional heat from the atmosphere, leading to warming waters and an increase in the frequency and intensity of extreme weather events such as hurricanes and storms. Mitigating the impacts of climate change requires reducing greenhouse gas emissions and implementing adaptation strategies, such as restoring coastal ecosystems to protect against erosion and sea level rise.
- 3 The relationship between the ocean and issues of justice and equity, human rights, and agriculture: The ocean plays a central role in issues of justice and equity, especially for coastal communities and vulnerable populations who depend on marine resources for subsistence and sustenance. However, these communities are often those most affected by the impacts of climate change, such as rising sea levels and extreme weather events. Furthermore, ocean pollution and degradation can harm food security and the livelihoods of communities that depend on fishing and coastal tourism. Ensuring justice and equity in the management and conservation of ocean resources is essential to protect human rights and promote more sustainable economic measures.

3.3 Issues or Attention Points

- 4 The interconnection of the ocean with the economy, health, food security, and job security: The global economy relies on the ocean's capacity to provide natural resources, food, energy, and employment opportunities for millions of people around the world. Sectors such as fishing, coastal tourism, maritime transport, and renewable energy depend on the resources and ecosystem services provided by the ocean. Furthermore, ocean health is directly linked to human health, as the ocean provides a vital source of food and nutrients. Ocean degradation can threaten food security and safe working conditions for those who depend on the ocean for their livelihoods.
- 5 The impact of the ocean on coastal communities and the need for integrated approaches that consider its influence on different aspects of sustainability: Coastal communities are closely linked to the ocean and depend on the ecosystem resources and services it provides for sustenance, economy, and culture. However, these communities are often the most vulnerable to the impacts of climate change, pollution, and ocean degradation. Therefore, integrated and holistic approaches are necessary to protect and strengthen the resilience of coastal communities, considering their interconnectedness with different aspects of sustainability such as economy, health, food security, and culture.

Understanding the interconnected nature of our planet is vital, especially when it comes to environmental issues. The ocean is a central piece in this complex puzzle, affecting and being affected by various ecological challenges. When experts discuss the most pressing environmental problems, they often find that these issues are not isolated but are part of a larger, integrated system where the ocean plays a crucial role. Isolated stories about the ocean might limit public engagement by failing to show how deeply intertwined it is with other environmental concerns. Recognizing this connection is key to addressing the challenges we face.

"I think the ocean is so intrinsically connected with politics, economics, even with fashion. (...) It is transversal. And as long as this is not acknowledged, we'll continue in this silo problem. How are you going to attract a business journalist if you keep addressing the ocean as an environmental issue? You need to constantly bring the transversality of the ocean to the forefront."

Interview participant

"This is a very interesting thing because a lot of people do not necessarily see the ocean, or live next to the ocean, but their lives, their future are completely intertwined with the ocean for the simple reason that the ocean and the climate are inseparable."

Interview participant

Specialists, when prompted about what requires immediate attention, consistently highlight issues that reflect the ocean's significance to the Earth's overall well-being. While individual narratives may not always convey the full scope of these interconnected issues, they can serve as a starting point for raising awareness and understanding among the public.

There are those who, when reflecting on the ocean's most urgent problems, immediately focus on environmental topics. In other words, they approach the ocean from a more technical and scientific point of view. Challenges mentioned include pollution, overfishing, habitat destruction, climate change, and biodiversity loss.

POLLUTION

Plastic Pollution: Discarded plastic waste, including microplastics, harming marine life and ecosystems.

Chemical Pollution: Runoff from agricultural activities, industrial discharges and oil spills contaminating the ocean.

Nutrient Pollution: Excess nutrients from fertilizers, leading to algal blooms and dead zones.

Marine Debris: Trash and waste, including metals, glass, rubber, and discarded fishing materials accumulating in the ocean, affecting marine habitats.

FISHING

Overfishing: Fishing above appropriate catch limits has a detrimental effect on fish populations and ocean wildlife.

Illegal, Unreported and Unregulated (IUU) Fishing: Fishing activities carried out outside regulations, contributing to the overexploitation of fishery resources.

Bycatch: Incidental capture of non-target species, leading to the decline of vulnerable species such as sea turtles, dolphins, and sharks.

Destructive Fishing Practices: Techniques like bottom trawling damage marine habitats such as coral reefs and seagrass beds.

HABITAT DESTRUCTION

Coral Reef Degradation: Damage caused by pollution, overfishing, and climate change leads to the decline of coral reef ecosystems.

Destruction of Mangroves and Seagrass: Removal for coastal development and aquaculture contributing to the loss of essential habitats and coastal erosion.

Loss of Wetlands: Reclamation for urban development, reducing storm protection, and creating a hostile environment for the survival of many species.

CLIMATE CHANGE

Ocean Acidification: Absorption of excess atmospheric carbon dioxide leading to acidification, impacting marine life with calcium carbonate shells.

Sea Level Rise: Melting of polar ice caps and thermal expansion of seawater, leading to coastal flooding and habitat loss.

Ocean Warming: Rising temperatures affecting marine biodiversity, migration patterns, and coral bleaching events.

LOSS OF BIODIVERSITY

Species Extinction: Overexploitation, habitat destruction, and climate change that lead to the decline and extinction of marine species.

Loss of Genetic Diversity: Reduction in genetic diversity within species due to population decline and fragmentation.

Ecosystem Decline: Marine food webs and ecosystem services are disrupted due to the loss of essential species and habitats.

"I think the ocean is facing destruction that is driven by... overfishing. (...) Overfishing one species, or two, or three impacts all the food chain. It's also impacting the ocean diversity. (...) Global warming is also impacting the ocean. The coral issues and the acidification of the sea."

Interview participant

There are those, in turn, who use a sociopolitical lens when discussing the most urgent problems of the ocean, referring to economic interests and governance issues. These are problems with profound systemic, socioeconomic, and political implications, requiring integrated and collaborative approaches for their resolution.

POLITICAL-ECONOMIC ISSUES

Exploitation Disguised as the Blue Economy:

The degradation of the ocean through industrial development that is often poorly supervised, including sectors such as maritime transport, tourism, and energy, highlights the growing need to think about activities carried out across the ocean in a more sustainable way. Although the “blue economy” is a concept meant to help define the sustainable management of ocean resources, this approach must be carefully examined to ensure that, while purporting to benefit both the economy and the marine environment, it does not become a facade concept that masks and protects degradation activities.

Financing for Ocean Conservation:

The need for more financial resources dedicated to ocean conservation and the inclusion of ocean economics in discussions on climate finance highlights the importance of economic aspects in protecting the ocean.

“I think the blue economy is reinforcing a neoliberal agenda and a capitalist way of looking at nature ... it's reinforcing colonial structures and systems.”

Interview participant

SOCIAL QUESTIONS

Community-Based Conservation: Recognizing and supporting local community-based conservation practices is essential to preventing injustices and ensuring the long-term sustainability of ocean resources.

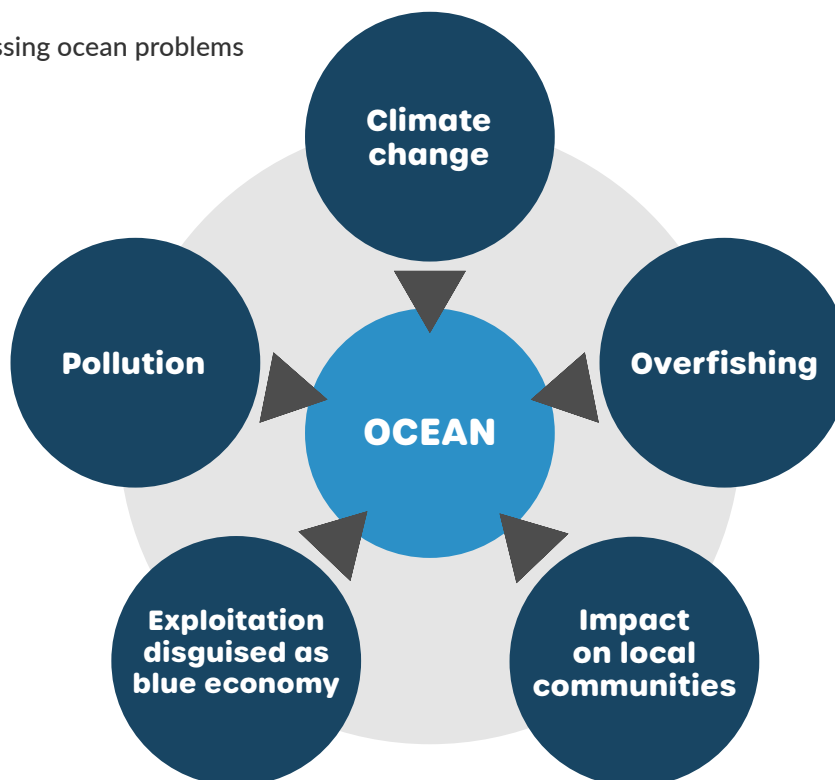
Impact on Local Communities: Ocean degradation has significant impacts on coastal communities that directly depend on marine resources for livelihoods and cultural identity.

“The most affected by climate change and ocean changes are people who identify as Black, Indigenous, and people of color.”

Interview participant

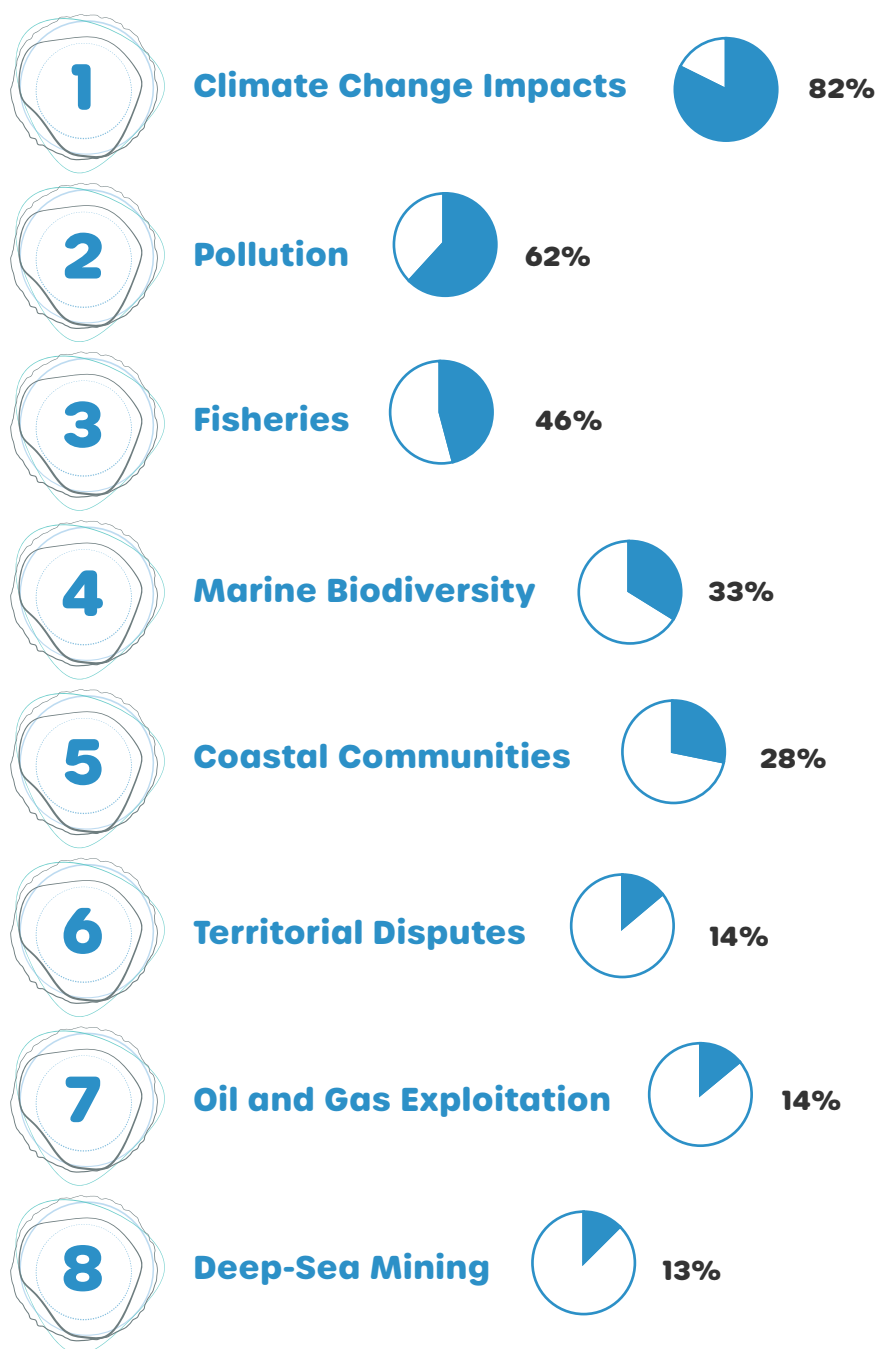
The experts' comments on the most urgent issues regarding the protection of the ocean leave no doubt that the ocean's problems are highly interconnected, with various issues influencing and exacerbating one another. Unrestrained exploitation, such as predatory fishing and pollution, is largely a consequence of economic development and disputes over interests, which consequently interferes with the climate and impacts vulnerable communities.

Graphic 9 | Most pressing ocean problems



The journalists' response in terms of the topics that receive more attention follows the perceptions of the experts interviewed in the qualitative phase. Journalists see climate change impacts as the most reported problem related to the ocean, followed by pollution, and fisheries issues in a much lower proportion. Impacted subjects, such as marine biodiversity and coastal communities, are observed less often, and territorial disputes or industry-related pieces (oil and gas, deep-sea mining) are even less frequent.

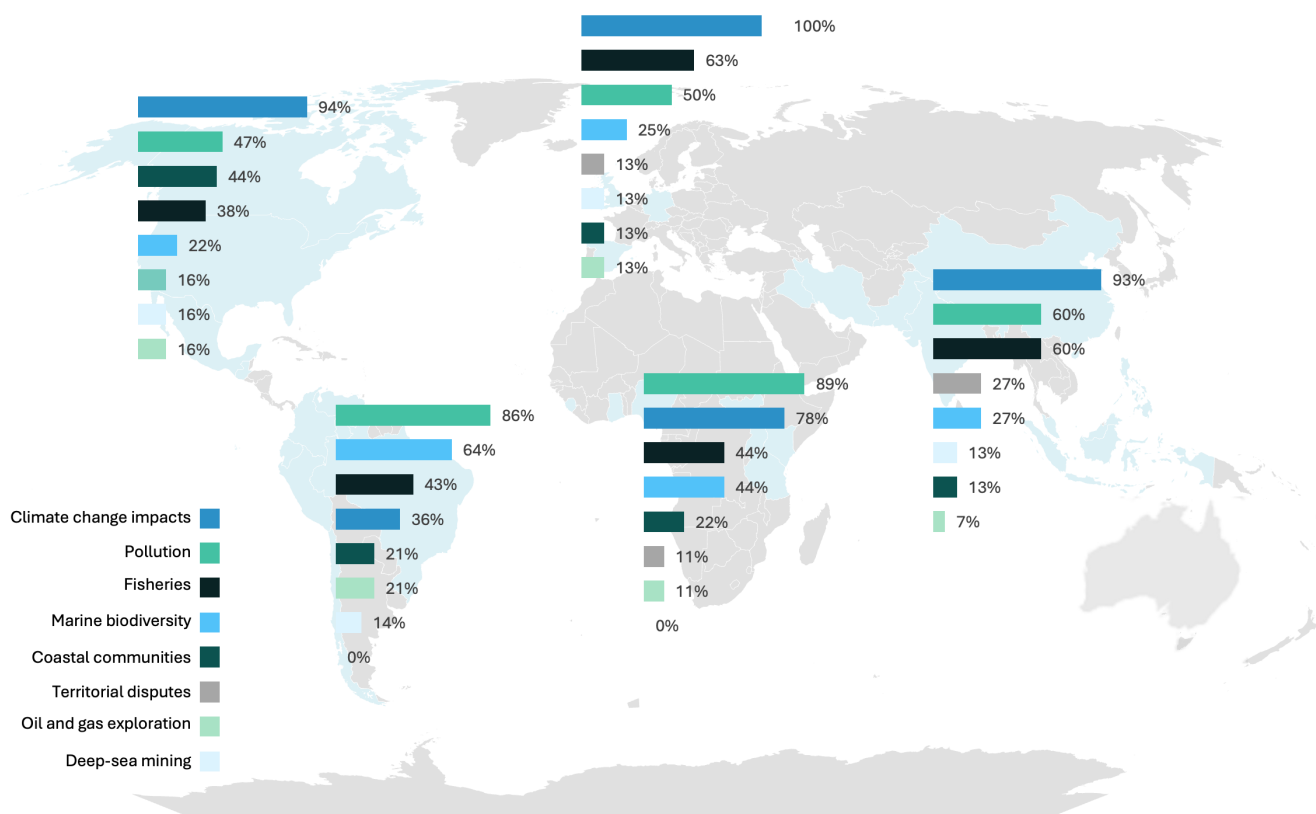
Graphic 10 | Ranking of most-reported ocean topics, according to journalists, % of cases⁶ (N=78)



⁶ Respondents were allowed multiple answers. The percentage shown represents the frequency of each option for all respondents (e.g.: 82% of the 78 respondents mentioned Climate Change Impacts, and 18% did not. 62% mentioned Pollution, and 38% did not, and so on).

There is a strong variation on what is noticed by journalists in the regional coverage. In South America, for example, pollution, biodiversity, and fisheries are observed by a greater proportion of journalists in comparison with climate change impacts. Coastal communities seem to receive more attention in North America than anywhere else, as is the case of territorial disputes in Asia. Although the regional analysis of the journalists' perceptions does not imply solid proof of which issues currently receive a bigger platform in local media outlets, this data reinforces the need for study and adaptation according to the demands in each area, more than a universal approach.

Graphic 11 | Most-reported ocean topics, according to journalists by continental distribution of the sample, % of cases (N=78)



© Australian Bureau of Statistics, Geonames, Microsoft, Navinfo, Open Places, OpenStreetMap, TomTom, Zenrin.

4

Ocean Reporting

The integrated analysis of the current ocean reporting landscape reveals that while there is impactful journalism being presented by a handful of media outlets and an overall positive interaction with the topic on social media platforms, the storytelling frequently lacks complexity, consistency, diversity, and human connection at a deeper level. Moreover, the prevailing perception among journalists and experts is that the coverage is insufficient given the relevance of the subject.

SOURCES

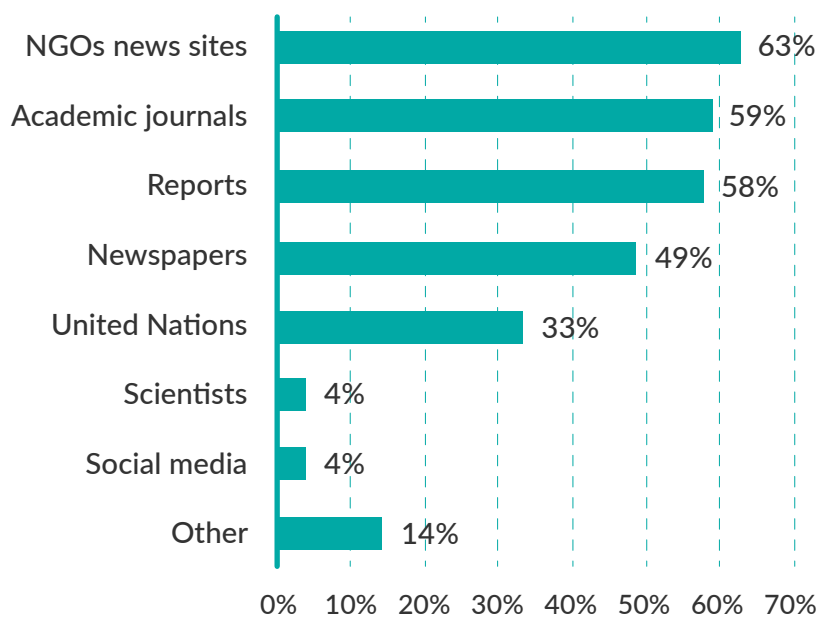
Where do respondents go to find information about the ocean?

A mix of scientific journals, specialized media, and Google alerts for related stories is the main format chosen by experts to consume ocean news. Academic publications are the preferred choice due to the value attributed to well-researched and reliable content. Specialized media outlets, such as Mongabay and China Dialogue Ocean, are trusted for their in-depth coverage, scientific accuracy, and diversified sources. Additionally, they rely on professional networks (which include other academics, NGOs, and international or intergovernmental organizations), well-known journalists or authors (such as Pulitzer Center grantee Ian Urbina), and industry websites or reports to keep themselves up to date with relevant developments. The specialists recognize, however, that these sources are geared toward an already interested and knowledgeable audience, and although they are essential to keep the conversation flowing within that group, there are key stakeholders that these pieces do not reach.

Mainstream news enters the discussion with the experts only when prompted. Then, major international outlets such as The Guardian, The Washington Post, The New York Times, BBC, and Reuters are remembered for having presented good work, usually praised for the attempt to reach broader audiences while maintaining sound scientific backing. Nonetheless, experts tend to believe there is a challenge in keeping consistency with more technical or complex topics, especially outside these major newsrooms. Local or smaller newspapers, for example, are mentioned when there is notable work, such as the Tribuna de Santos in the southeast of Brazil, which works closely with ocean culture programs in the region. One of its journalists, Arminda Augusto, is praised both for her deep knowledge and efforts in understanding the entire dynamics of the relationships between ocean issues, local communities, industry, and academia, and for the continuity of the issues on the agenda that she strives to maintain. Another example of regional outlets making a difference is when they work in tandem with conservation organizations to report on a topic in an investigative but also educational way to reach the general public and decision-makers, like Kompas in Indonesia.

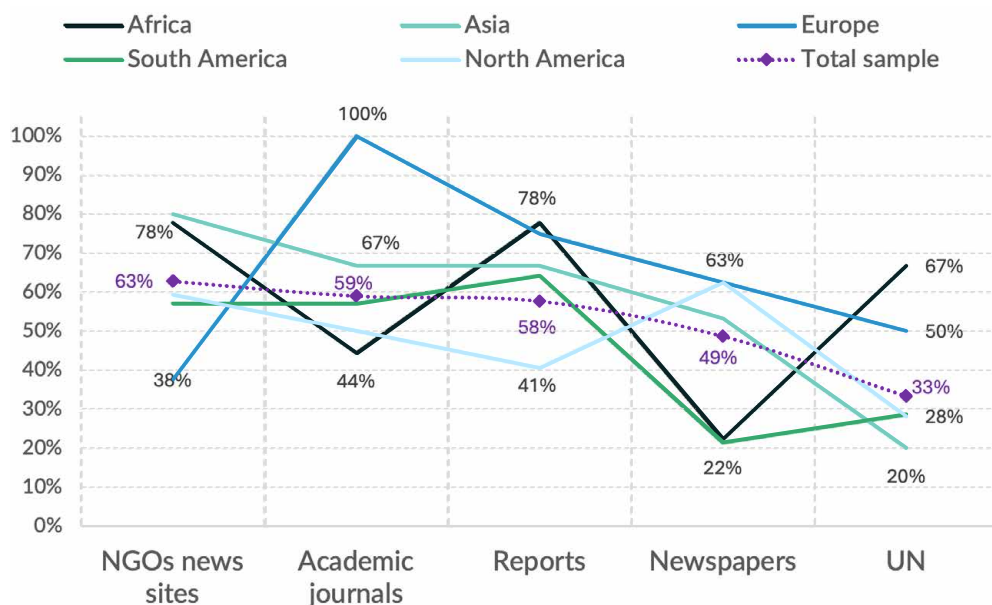
On the other side of the news, journalists tend to seek mainly NGO news sites (63%), academic journals (59%), reports (58%), and newspapers (49%) when looking for information on ocean issues. Only one out of three goes to the United Nations, and a meager 4% would immediately reach out to scientists as a source. However, that scenario varies significantly depending on the geographical scope of the journalist. Although the sample distribution does not allow for statistically robust comparisons, the trend shows how the trusted sources are not the same depending on where in the world one is writing from. It is expected that the number of organizations, their configuration and source of support, and the type of work they perform in each region help to explain such differences. Yet, the experts often pointed out that not all relevant voices are given the same space on the agenda, particularly when they do not come from the Global North.

Graphic 12 | Journalists' primary sources of information on ocean issues, % of cases (N=78)



The higher trust in academic journals observed in Europe compared to Africa, which in turn seems to rely on the U.N. at a much higher level than any other continent, elicits the reflection of how much space local voices are being given not only to tell their stories but to produce knowledge about their regions. The comparison of newspaper consultation is perhaps the most illustrative gap: while European and North American journalists feel more confident consulting what has been locally investigated about the ocean by media outlets, their counterparts in Africa and South America are the least inclined to do so. In fact, the suspicions of greater interests of media outlets besides conveying full stories are rather pervasive among respondents in the Global South. There is recognition that there are greater interests behind any organization, but the diminished credibility of the media is a reality in many academic environments that focus their work on these regions.

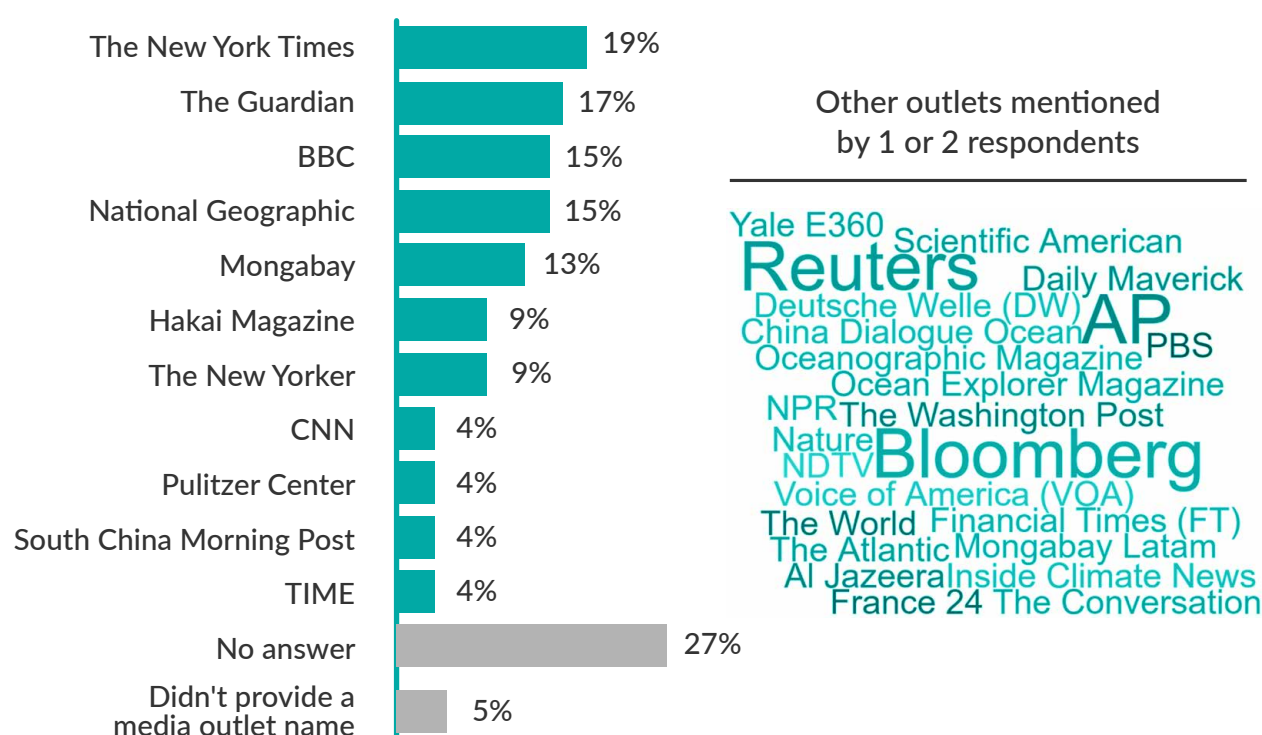
Graphic 13 | Journalists' primary sources of information on ocean issues by continental distribution of the sample, % of cases (N=78)



When asked to directly name global media outlets perceived as good examples of ocean reporting, many journalists in the survey recalled similar names to those pointed out by experts. *The New York Times* is mentioned by nearly one out of five respondents (19%), followed by *The Guardian* (17%), BBC (15%), *National Geographic* (15%), and Mongabay (13%). *Hakai Magazine* and *The New Yorker* were also mentioned fairly frequently (9% of mentions each), and a few respondents highlighted the work of CNN, the Pulitzer Center, *South China Morning Post*, and *TIME* (4% each). Yet at least one out of four (27%) did not provide a prominent media name that could be remembered for its coverage of ocean stories.

Graphic 14

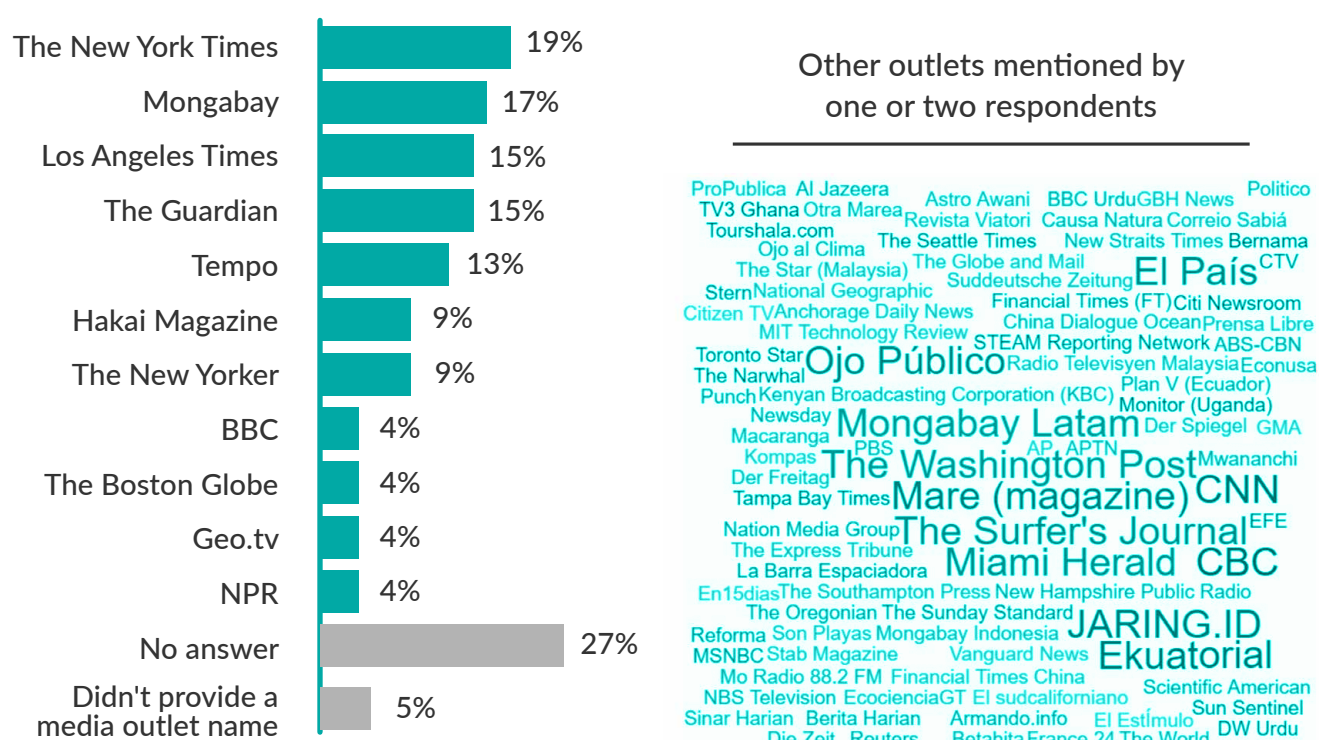
Most prominent global outlets doing good ocean reporting, according to journalists, % of cases (N=78)



Within a regional context, a wider variety of outlets is presented. The survey asked journalists to indicate media channels covering ocean stories in their region, without any reference to the quality of reporting. Due to the geographic distribution obtained in the sample (see Graphic 4), a higher number of mentions of North American outlets is expected. *TEMPO*, from Indonesia, and *Geo.tv*, from Pakistan, are the exceptions with 5% and 4% of the mentions, respectively. In total, 104 different media outlets were recalled, including national networks and local Indigenous channels, state-owned vehicles, nonprofit agencies, or independent broadcasting. The focus of these organizations can include investigative journalism, environmentally focused or mainstream, covering politics, finances, and entertainment, informing local communities or nations at different levels and in different formats. Such variety indicates that an optimized impact of ocean reporting will need contextual adaptation, using the platforms that are already available, but also innovating in ways to reach the target audiences.

One out of 10 respondents of the survey did not provide a media outlet name representing their local coverage but mentioned another institution such as NGOs, universities, or research groups. Furthermore, an additional 27% could not recall who is telling ocean stories in the areas they work. The lack of recognition of media representatives associated with the topic can be an indication that these issues are simply not on these journalists' radar, and that it is likely that good work at the different regional levels is being conducted, but not yet recognized. In fact, experts indicate that this is a possibility, and that one of the benefits of fellowship programs such as the Pulitzer Center's Ocean Reporting Network could be finding these local gems and giving them support to gain the attention they deserve. Nevertheless, the prevailing sentiment shared in both studies is that the coverage of ocean stories is insufficient.

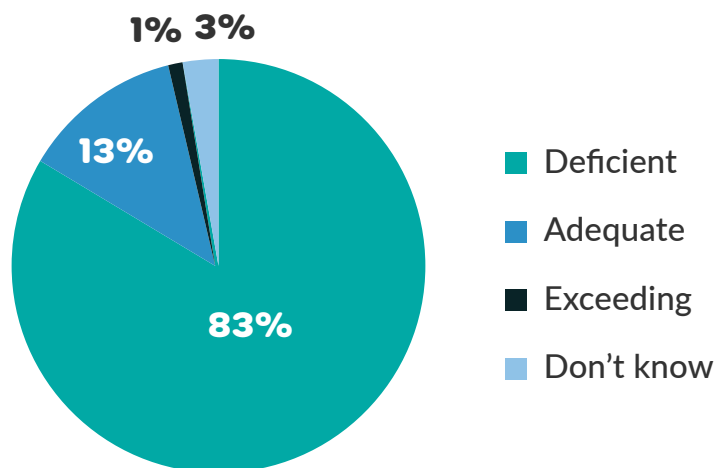
Graphic 15 | Media outlets conducting regional coverage of ocean stories mentioned by journalists, % of cases (N=78)



4.1 Coverage

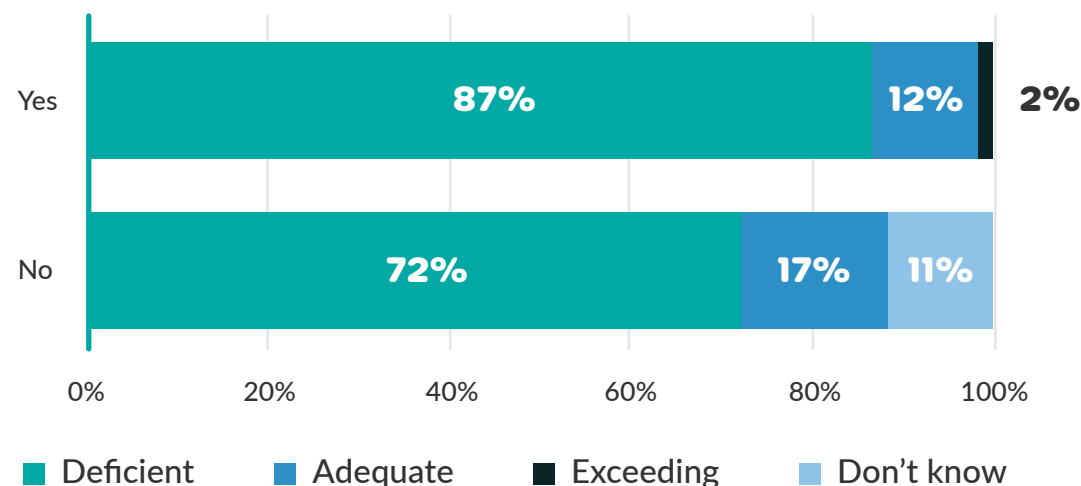
Nearly nine out of 10 journalists claim the coverage of ocean news in their region is insufficient. This is in line with the assessment of most experts that not all major mainstream media outlets have consistent attention to the subject, despite showing somewhat steady monitoring of climate change stories. Failing to keep the public and policymakers continuously informed about ocean issues, according to experts, contributes to the lack of identification and engagement with conservation causes.

Graphic 16 | Journalists' assessment of current coverage in ocean reporting, considering how ocean issues affect their region (N=78)



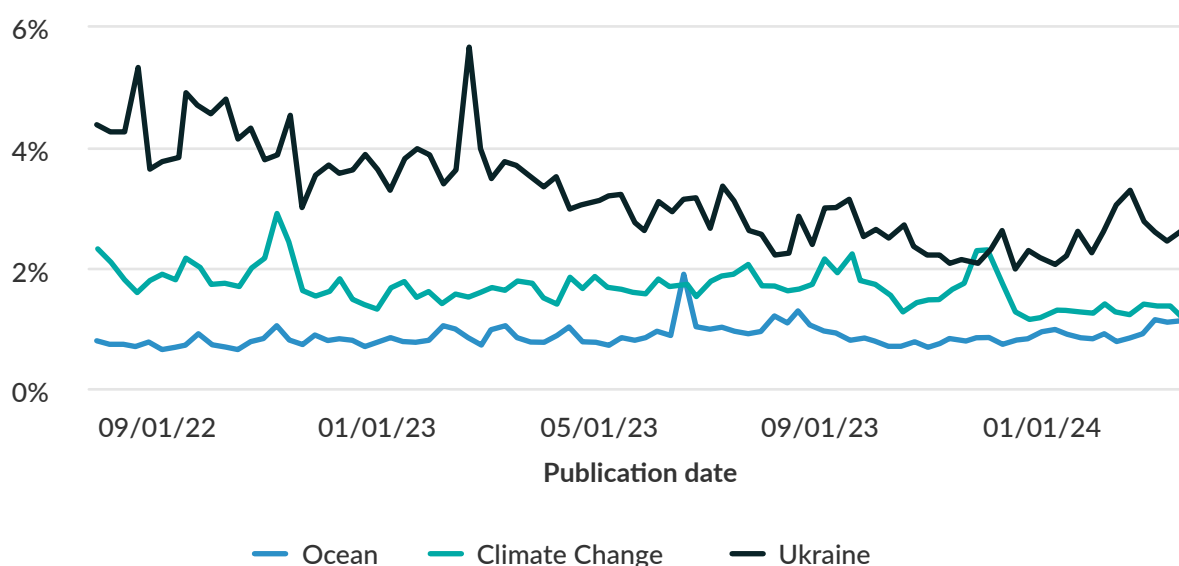
An illustrative example can be the fact that journalists who have written stories about the ocean in the past are significantly more aware of the deficient coverage of the topic in their regions. The more information and training they have, the higher the chances of a more comprehensive understanding and coverage of the topic, which is likely a reality for audience engagement as well. The perceived reality, though, as remarked by a few experts, is that ocean stories seem to be regarded more as part of a niche agenda than as topics that substantially affect the health of the planet in a continuous manner.

Graphic 17 | Journalists' assessment of current coverage in ocean reporting in their region by experience writing stories involving ocean issues



Indeed, the Media Cloud analysis shows that the keyword “ocean” reaches peaks of attention on days involving the launching of campaigns or studies, the signing of international agreements, or major unexpected events, like the accident with the Titan submersible in June 2023. The Media Cloud analysis helps to illustrate the attention paid to a theme in news articles over time. The comparison in Graphic 18 below indicates that the sense of urgency and interconnectedness captured in the experts’ interviews is not reflected in the media in the same proportions, as if the relationship between ocean and climate change exists within a parallel dimension to be visited solely when there is a big event to remind the audience of that. To provide a baseline comparison with a topic that has overtly been considered urgent and has gained considerable space, the keyword “Ukraine” reaches 3.28% of total attention over the same period, with a maximum reach of 7.83% in February 2023.

Graphic 18 | Attention over time to each keyword in articles within collections of news sources (Media Cloud)



Maximum reach

Ocean: **2,52%** on Jun 23, 2023.

Climate change: **3,15%** on Nov 8, 2022.

Ocean & Climate change: **0,38%** on Aug 10, 2023.

Total attention

Ocean: **0,83%**

Climate change: **1,396%**

Ocean & Climate change: **0,14%**

Experts and journalists tend to justify the underwhelming coverage due to budgetary pressures on media outlets, lack of interested audiences, insufficient ocean literacy among journalists, and industry interests influencing the public agenda. Even so, there is prevailing optimism that high-quality, well framed, more frequent stories can change that scenario, making ocean stories more relatable to broader audiences and inspiring action.

4.2 Good Stories

"I feel like often journalists play a very good role in terms of showing varieties of stories and truths."

Interview participant

There is a consensus among experts that good reporting on ocean topics relies on three main features: accuracy, inclusion, and imagery. When they recall particularly good coverage or name an outlet that has done well, that is often justified by an observed scientific depth and precision that shows journalists dedicated time to understanding the issue and consulting the right sources, both in terms of being scientifically correct and including diverse perspectives relevant to the phenomena. Moreover, the power of images is perhaps the most pervasively pointed feature of an impactful, memorable piece. It is no coincidence, for example, that ocean-themed documentaries are regarded as so striking by experts, even in cases where there are strong disagreements with what has been portrayed from a scientific perspective.

Another key element of good stories recalled by specialists is a critical examination of the issues being reported. They believe that the pieces that do not take information at face value but look into the different perspectives involved and help readers navigate through the complexity of an issue in a palatable and relatable way are the ones with higher potential to generate impact in the long run. And, according to them, that can be achieved by humanizing the stories, connecting them to people's realities, and highlighting potential solutions. Because the ocean can be rather an "out of sight, out of mind" question for most, that connection is essential to generating meaningful impact.

Graphic 19

Features of good journalistic coverage of ocean stories and examples of who has provided good work, according to the experts

Depth and Scientific Accuracy

Consulting scientists and basing reports in solid evidence.

Distinct Journalism

Highlighting stories in reputable outlets with global reach that influence decision makers.

Dedicated Campaigns

Bringing issues to the forefront in a consistent manner.

Expert Dialogue

Engaging experts in a deeper level, including environmental journalists, for a more diversified and inclusive view.

Localized Coverage

Connecting with local communities and raising awareness.

Powerful Visuals

Captivating by building an emotional connection through fresh and context-relevant imagery.

People

Ian Urbina, Laura Trethewey, David Eades, David Shukman, Harry Surjadi, Zhang Chun, Erton Escobar, Ma Tianjie, Arminda Augusto, Paulina Chamorro

Media outlets

BBC, *The Guardian*, Al Jazeera, Nexa, *The New York Times*, Reuters, *Tribuna de Santos*, *The Washington Post*, *Folha de São Paulo*, Mongabay, Kompas, Reuters, *The Conversation*, *Estadão*, *The Globe and Mail*, China Dialogue Ocean, *The Economist*, *National Geographic*, *Journal of Fisheries of China*

Specific programs or series

Sky Ocean Rescue, Chasing Coral, Blue Planet, Seascope

NGOs

China Blue Sustainability Institute, Oceana, Greenpeace Africa, Pulitzer Center

Among all the issues regarded as more pressing in terms of ocean conservation, plastic pollution is the one more easily recognized on the public's agenda. Some of the experts suggest that the coverage and concern generated around the problem could be considered as a benchmark for raising awareness and demand for further stories about other urgent problems. While understanding that there is still much to be done to cease and mitigate the effects of plastic pollution in marine ecosystems, the general awareness and attention to the topic is considered a successful case for education and engagement.

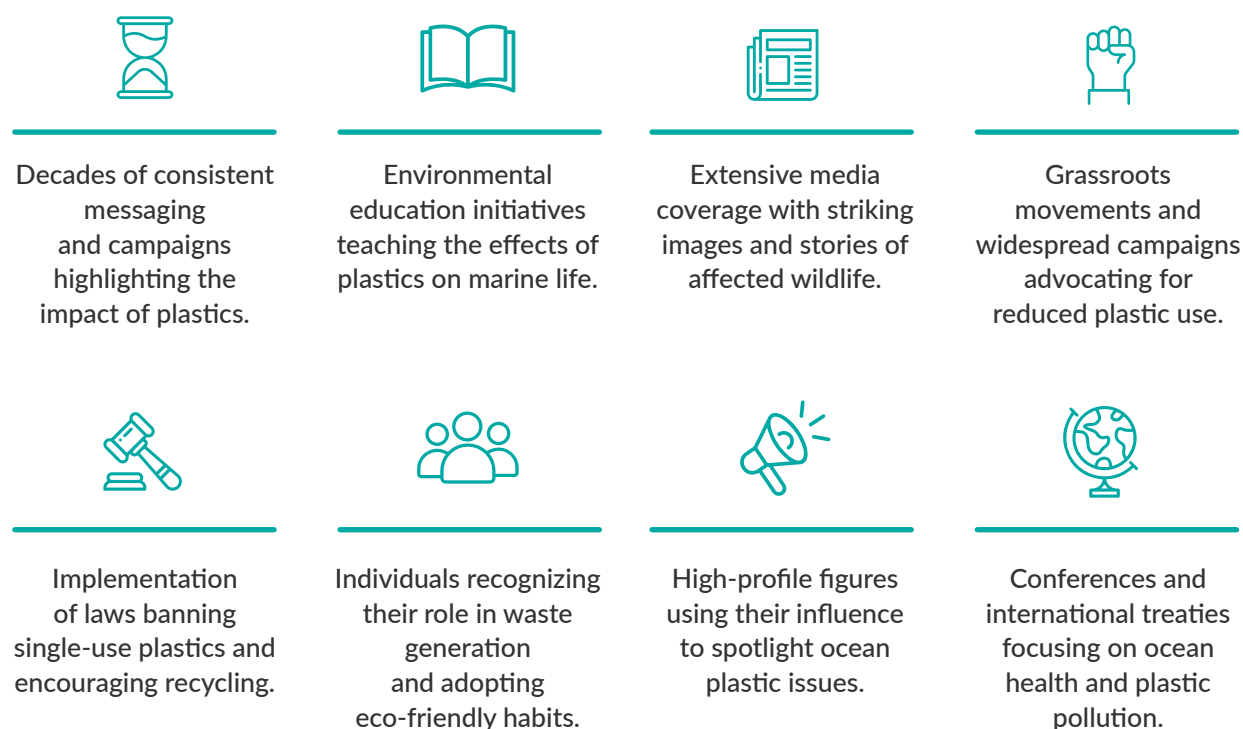
"Something that has worked? Plastic pollution. Perhaps even a little too much sometimes because it makes it more difficult for other topics. All the funding and attention go to plastic."

Interview participant

A combination of factors is behind such success. First, it is believed that the persistence and resilience of scientists, activists, and the media in approaching the topic at different levels of complexity and urgency throughout the years were paramount to fostering education and mobilization of society in general, which also influenced public policy and regulation.

Secondly, the effects of plastic pollution on marine life are easily observable and comprehensible for a wide variety of audiences, and it generates a list of attainable actions for one to "do their part" (reducing consumption, recycling, making small changes to daily habits). It makes it possible for people to go through certain inconveniences (of varying degrees) and feel that they have some agency in being part of the solution. It allows companies and governments to show actions with a greater effect, backed by the visceral reactions to the images of the plastic straw being removed from a turtle's nostril almost a decade ago.

Graphic 20 | Features of good journalistic coverage of ocean stories and examples of who has provided good work, according to the experts



An additional element, however, is also acknowledged in the interviews: A change of habits in plastic consumption and discarding has occurred because society was ready for it to happen, which paved the way for establishing the foundations of laws and regulations imposed on companies and consumers. And because it is such an accessible subject, the demand for stories of success or exposing bad actors was aroused. Less palatable issues, therefore, might require larger educational and engagement efforts to provoke a similar result.

Nevertheless, even among the experts who are more skeptical about how much media stories can make a significant difference in terms of bringing about real change in society, the general perception is that it also cannot be achieved without the media since it is considered the most straightforward bridge between science, policy-making, and the public.

"Oh, so I'm going to swap my plastic bottle and help in a beach cleanup. Got it. The barriers to acting are too low or nonexistent. And if you juxtapose the plastic issue with ocean acidification, for example, which is a much bigger problem, it is a harder piece to sell because it is not visible. The ocean itself is not changing color. OK, coral bleaching is happening, and this is why the Netflix documentary Chasing Coral was a mega success when it happened because it visually showed the ocean acidification issue. But the things I can do against ocean acidification are the same I can do to help with climate change. I can use my car less ..., I will have to change my lifestyle drastically. Society is not yet ready to change their lifestyle drastically."

Interview participant

4.3 What is Lacking?

If good journalism is defined by scientific accuracy, inclusive and representative coverage, consistent and critical reporting, the nearly mirrored opposite picture is described to point out the challenges to make it better. Many experts highlight the complexity of ocean topics as one of the barriers to effective reporting. Combined with a perceived limited interest and investment coming from media outlets and a lack of specialized knowledge among journalists, respondents note that much of the reporting is either too complex to be relatable to a broader public or too shallow to represent the true depth of the problems.

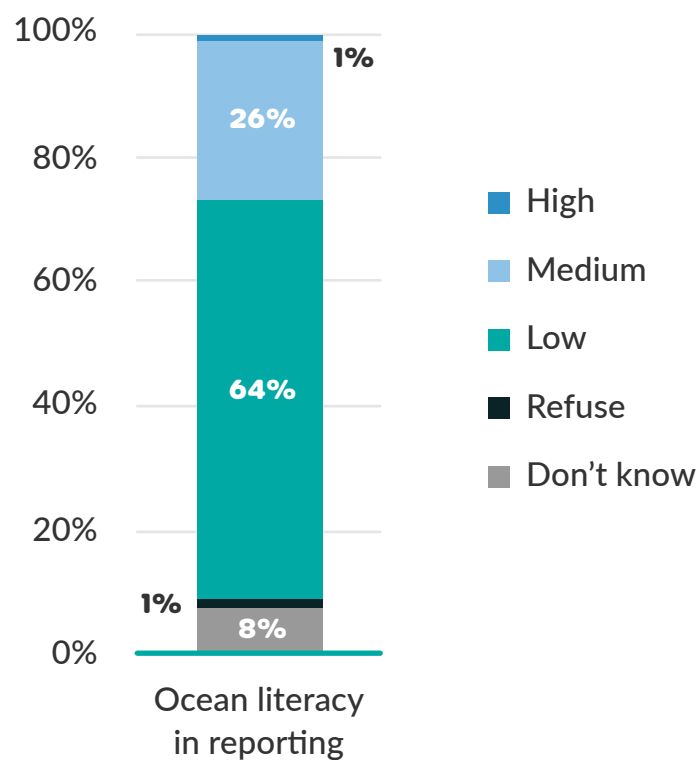
When it comes to the complexity of the stories, two main areas are mentioned. First, there is a gap in knowledge among journalists that derives from insufficient ocean literacy, but also from a lack of access to sources on the ground and to the technological expertise required to understand the more objective aspects of the issues. Journalists tend to recognize there is room for increasing their knowledge about the topics that need attention. Almost two out of three (64%) believe the level of ocean literacy in reporting today is low, and 26% say it is average. Additionally, 8% were not certain how to answer this question. When aggregated, those who hesitate or state there is a need for improvement amount to nine out of 10 professionals, indicating ocean literacy is also a demand within the media itself, and not only among the general population and policymakers.

"For example, the BBNJ⁷ Agreement was so celebrated as this win for conservation, and if you're not for it, if you're not for marine-protected areas, you're on the wrong side, right? But that is not necessarily creating room for being critical of conservation in the way it's being done. (...) A lot of it is actually leading to more injustices for Indigenous and local communities who rely on the ocean the most. Those stories, I don't feel, are coming out as much."

Interview participant

⁷ BBNJ Agreement (Biodiversity Beyond National Jurisdiction), or the High Seas Treaty.

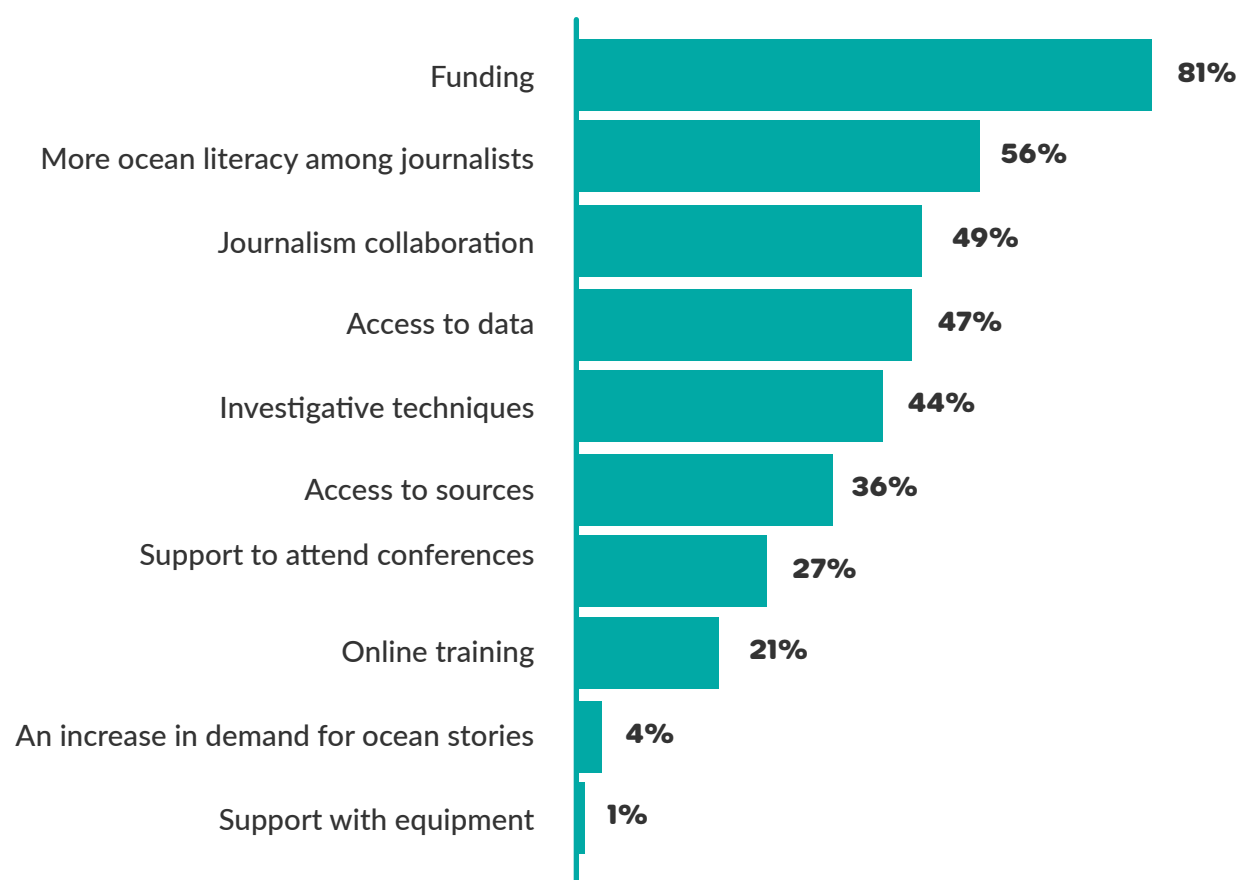
Graphic 21 | Journalists' assessment of the level of literacy in current ocean reporting (N=78)



The challenges in reaching locations and producing more on-the-ground content are partly justified by experts as a budgetary issue. They comment on the distance these places are from the main newsrooms, and how costly it can be to have someone dedicated to exploring the topics in their full complexity.

Incidentally, 81% of journalists list financial assistance as the most pressing demand in the field. Better ocean literacy and collaboration come in sequence, mentioned by 56% and 49% respectively, and indicate that a significant part of these professionals acknowledge improvements are at least partly within their control. A considerable number of mentions to access to data (47%), investigative techniques (44%), and sources (36%) shows an alignment in the perceptions of journalists and experts for the need for further assistance in maintaining the accuracy and depth valued for this type of story.

Graphic 22 | The biggest needs to increase coverage of ocean stories, according to journalists, % of cases (N=78)



The second main aspect that entails the lack of complexity, according to specialists, lies beyond the knowledge and technical expertise the journalists can hold. It has to do with who can help them make their stories complete. Many experts express the sentiment that, although there are a variety of researchers, community and Indigenous leaders, and representatives of local economies who could provide a broader understanding of any particular ocean topic, these actors are not consulted as often. The idea stems from the notion that grassroots representatives of global majorities frequently do not have a seat at the table in the big conversations and plans for

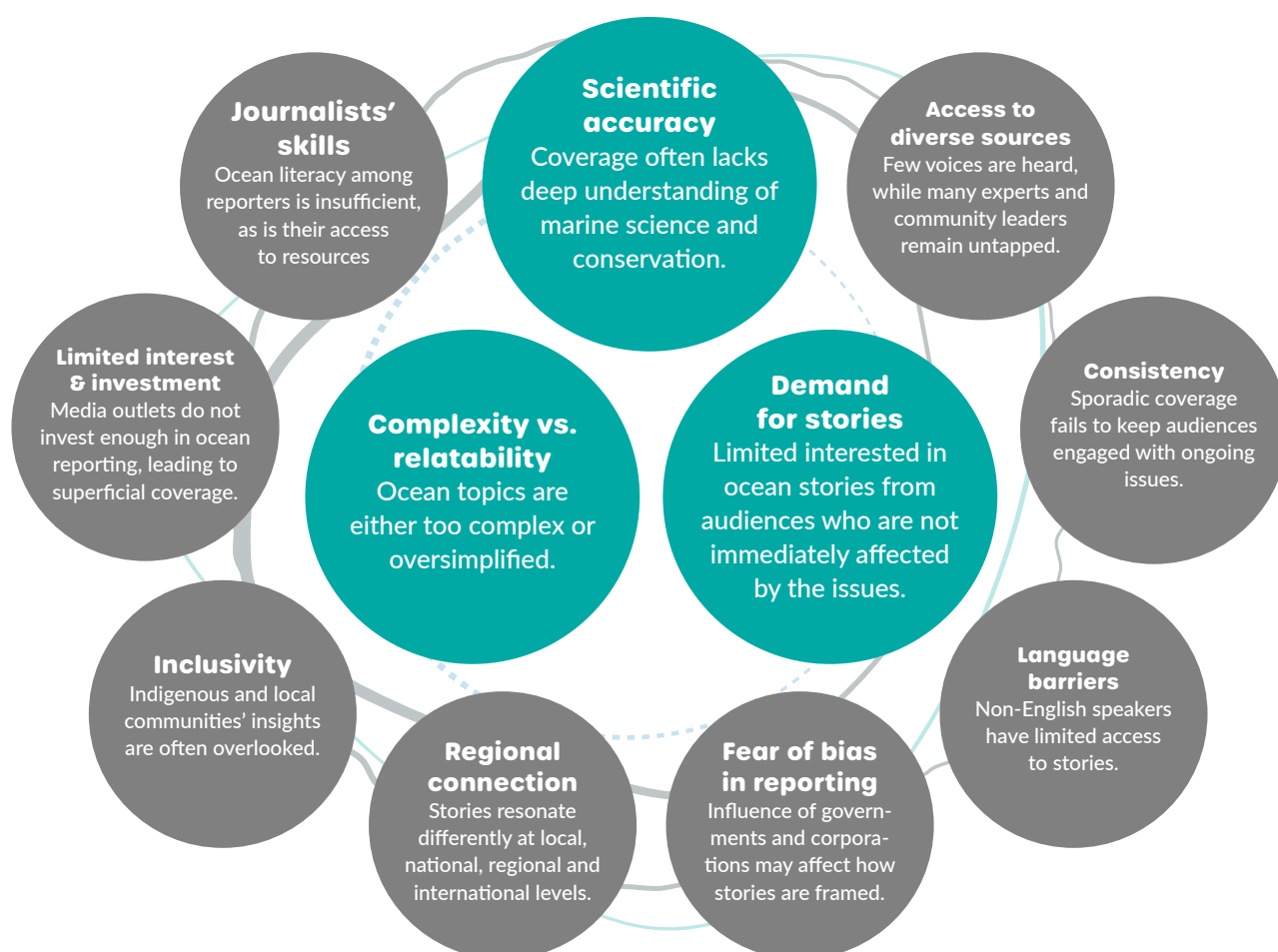
action in conservation, even when that happens in their territory. And as they are underrepresented within these alliances that seek improvement, they also tend to be marginalized by the media when their stories need to be heard. In the scientific arena, a few experts note how often the same source is consulted for different issues when there is a plethora of researchers who could contribute to a deeper understanding of a problem. As for the local communities, specialists point out that it is not only a lack of native knowledge that weakens the coverage, but there can be a missed opportunity in humanizing the issue for a more compelling narrative.

Additionally, experts see the inconsistency of coverage and lack of attention by media outlets as another challenge. As mentioned before, besides the space given to plastic pollution and sporadic series or special events (or incidents), the prevailing idea is that there is no interest in ocean stories. In fact, a few journalists mention the lack of demand without any prompting in the questionnaire (see Graphic 19). A few specialists believe part of the reason could be that the reporting of ocean issues is reactive, and not preventive. Problems do receive attention when they occur, but there is no continuous reporting to keep the audiences connected to the agenda. On the other hand, the Brand24 analysis indicates that social media content generated by users about the ocean is predominantly positive, with negative or critical associations such as pollution, waste, and ships being less frequent.

An integrated view of these different data points and the benchmark case of plastic pollution suggest that increasing the demand for ocean stories requires strengthening the relationship of the general public and decision-makers with them. Improving ocean literacy and engaging the public with positive and accessible stories might be key to establishing a balance with the more pressing issues that need attention.

Issues mentioned less frequently by the experts interviewed are the influence that corporations and governments may have on how topics are portrayed in the media, the language barriers and accessibility to stories published by main outlets, and the localized coverage and how it can be poorly represented at varying regional levels. The latter is based on the perception that the stories often focus either on a specific community or on big international news, sometimes failing to generate a connection at national and regional levels, where a lot of the decision-making for programs and policies takes place.

Graphic 23 | Challenges to better ocean coverage and some of the reasons behind them



Finally, some of the experts also bring attention to the need to find better visuals to represent such important stories. There is a perception that journalists and editors are often left with generic, cliché stock images that likely dim engagement with the story.

Impactful imagery, in that sense, is defined by trying to capture visual evidence of an issue, bridging the gap between an audience that may be too far from the coast and the problem being addressed. The beauty and complexity of marine environments and the urgency of conservation are well-known facts, and the images illustrating stories should go a step further in provoking an emotional connection. Gloom-and-doom narratives, which are quite pervasive in ocean storytelling, have had their value in provoking emotional reactions from audiences, but more current assessments show that they can also be alienating, generating a sense of lack of agency and solutions. Hence, avoiding generic visuals is as important as presenting the humanity angle, showing positive interactions and how feasible they are.

“There is not much variety available. Often, journalists don't know where to access different images, so you end up with, whatever the story is, you get a picture of a wave or a satellite image of a bit of ocean and a bit of a beach, which frankly is really boring. (...) We've done some research around this as well... People eventually get desensitized to images of species with plastic bags, which were so impactful at the beginning.”

Interview participant



5

The Ocean Reporting Network

The first impression among experts upon hearing a brief description of the Ocean Reporting Network (ORN) is predominantly positive, particularly among those who had looked for information on the matter prior to the interview. The initiative is seen as a valuable contribution to ocean journalism, with the potential to enhance the depth and quality of reporting, bringing opportunities to local journalists and stories, raising awareness, and encouraging the general public and policymakers to act. A few respondents who were unfamiliar with the fellowship took a more neutral stance but seemed open to learning more about the concept and execution of the programs.

Graphic 24 | Experts' first impressions when discussing the Ocean Reporting Network



When asked to expand on the positive effects the ORN could have on ocean reporting, the overall impression is that by improving coverage of the stories through support for journalists, the fellowships will help advance ocean conservation overall.

Further likely outputs speculated by experts include encouraging international action aimed at protecting the ocean and the vulnerable groups that depend on them, as well as highlighting misconducts and corruption cases by exposing bad actors.

The importance of collaboration was highlighted as a major positive influence on the coverage of the field. Through that, experts believe journalists can share expertise, broaden their perspectives, address transboundary issues, reach wider audiences, and enhance their credibility. They believe such teamwork can facilitate more on-the-ground coverage in underreported locations, especially in the Global South. Additionally, there is hope that by bringing in different backgrounds and perspectives, reporters will also be able to capture the interconnectedness of ocean issues and provide a more nuanced narrative that will engage audiences better.



Expanding these collaborations beyond the newsroom is an idea that sparks interest among the specialists. A few of them remark that working with universities and local experts would be crucial for the fellowships to get a representative picture of the issues, especially in China and African countries. They regard that kind of local knowledge as an integral path for reporters to go through in the course of their investigations, and one that can be highly valuable for understanding the different regional impacts of climate change on the ocean, addressing overfishing or illegal fishing problems that go beyond borders, investigating marine pollution cases, highlighting the decline of marine biodiversity and its impact throughout, and exploring the cultural and socioeconomic effects of ocean-related problems.

6

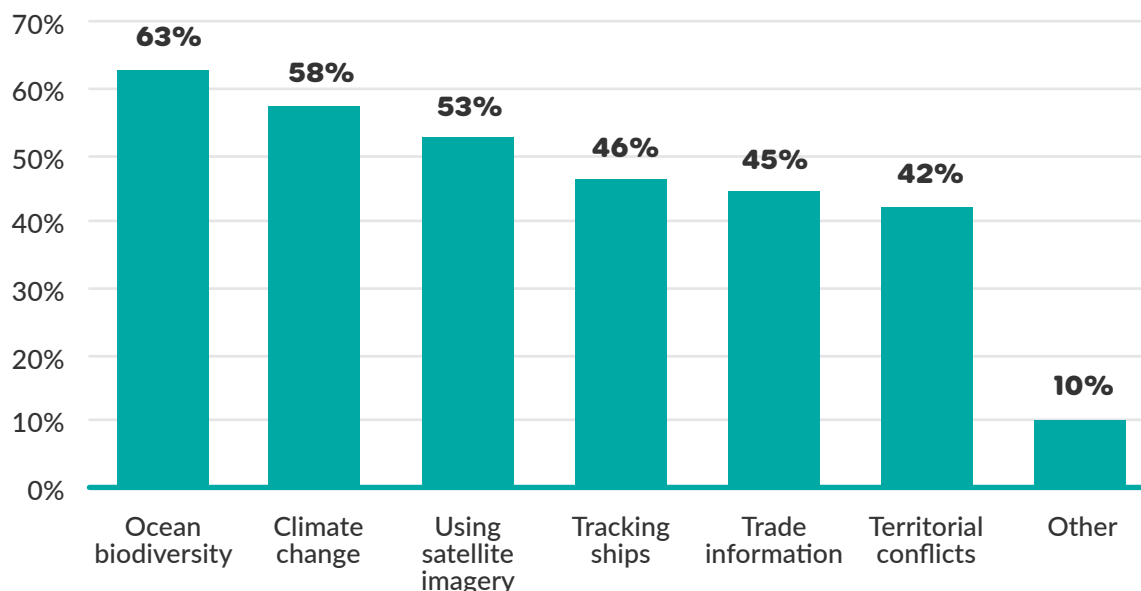
Shaping Better Stories

Having discussed their perceptions of ocean issues and how they are covered, and explored the potential contributions of the Ocean Reporting Network, the experts in the qualitative study were invited to reflect upon the regions, topics, stakeholders, and impacts of the initiative as an exercise to build an ideal agenda and identify the needs to put it into fruition. Journalists were also consulted about their needs and perceptions on improving coverage.

6.1 Preparing to set sail

It is almost a consensus among the participants of the qualitative and quantitative studies that journalists covering ocean issues will benefit, as will their pieces, from more dedicated time and funds, enhanced specific and technical knowledge, engaging visuals, consistent reporting, and access to local stories and expertise. In terms of specific training, 63% of journalists believe they need to improve their familiarity with ocean biodiversity topics, and 58% say the same about climate change. Approximately half of them acknowledge the importance of training in technical tools such as using satellite imagery (53%) and tracking ships (46%). Improved understanding of trade information and territorial conflicts are also welcome topics for at least four out of 10 respondents. Other topics include research methods, marine governance, money laundering in ocean trade, deep-sea mining, and cultural sensitivity when approaching Indigenous communities.

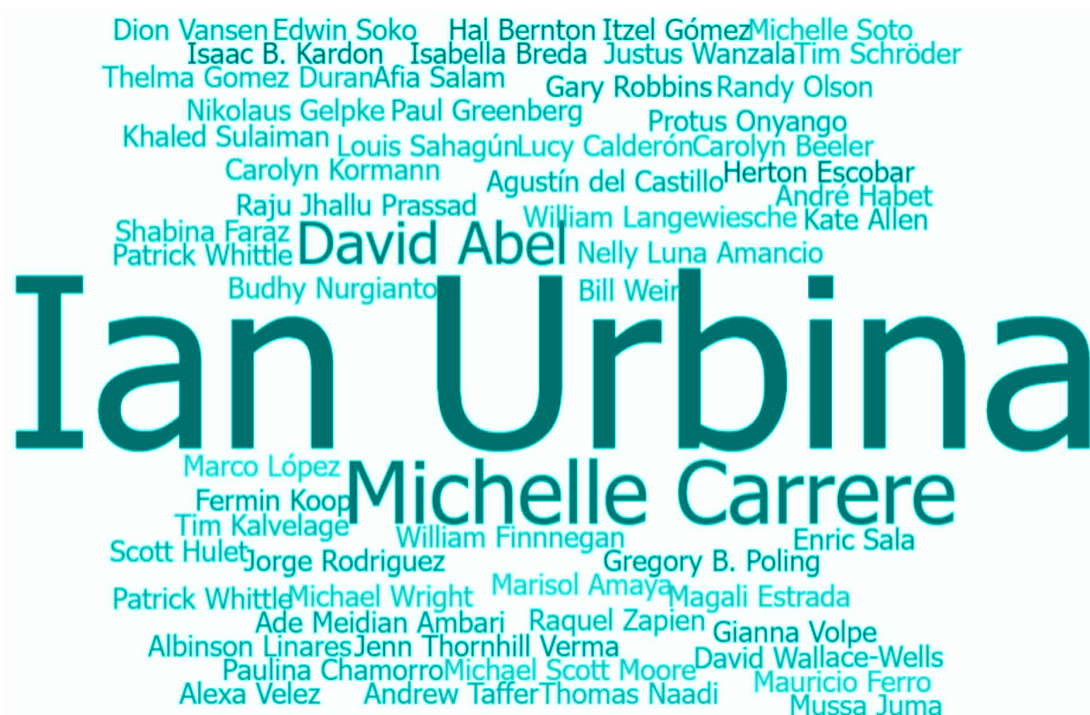
Graphic 26 | Training content needed, according to journalists, % of cases (N=78)



Benchmarking against current production, the survey participants were invited to name leading professionals covering ocean topics in their regions. Ian Urbina was mentioned by 13% of his peers and remembered by a few of the experts interviewed as well. His prolific investigative work and human-centered storytelling place him as an example of the coverage many of the participants in both phases of the study would like to see. Michelle Carrere, from Mongabay, and David Abel, from *The Boston Globe*, were also mentioned by their peers more than once (4% and 3%, respectively).

Graphic 27

Professionals mentioned by interviewed journalists as leading journalists covering ocean issues. N=78*



*Sample distribution:

Mentioned a name: **62%**

No specific name: **4%**

No answer: **34%**

Word cloud weight: Min=1. Max=10

Drawing on the examples of their peers can be a way to gain additional perspectives and context on the issues, which can enhance the depth of reporting if the journalist has been given the training to consume ocean stories with a more critical and independent eye. Yet, a third of the respondents (34%) could not think of a colleague covering these stories in their region.

6.2 Where to go?

Stories from different parts of the world can be appealing because they show how similar the issues of overexploitation and harming of the ocean can be and provide innovative ideas on how to strategize in conservation and policymaking. Experts pointed out this sense of interconnectedness as a reason for following stories that come from different seas. They emphasize the importance of global collaboration and learning from different cultural approaches to similar problems.

Emerging technologies and creative approaches can inspire action worldwide and, in reverse, being able to connect local events with global trends helps with understanding and addressing problems more effectively. Moreover, unique stories and ones that can show the balance between global urgency and local nuances can be engaging and highly educational within the perspective that universal solutions are not necessarily ideal for localized problems. Including diverse voices and detailed reporting enhances knowledge, making such stories more relatable and fostering networking and collaborative opportunities in ocean conservation efforts.

Most experts believe that the coverage of ocean issues should be targeted at underrepresented regions, and that concept involves either remote areas, places lacking local reporting capacity, or simply those marginalized in global media. The concept of the Global South is pervasive in these reflections, within the argument that these nations are often the most affected by overfishing and other forms of exploitation. The predominant idea is to go to places where ocean issues are particularly pressing or where significant developments in conservation can be reported. Specific mentions were made to East and West Africa, Small Island Developing States (SIDS), Southeast Asia, China and the Yellow Sea, the Caribbean, Indian Ocean Territories (particularly the Western Indian Ocean Region), the Pacific Islands and the Coral Triangle, the Amazon River basin, the Polar regions, and the High Seas.



Graphic 28 | Lesser covered regions and related topics suggested by experts

Small Island Developing States (SIDS)	Focus could be on how ocean health, climate change, and sea-level rise will affect their survival, since these large ocean states rely heavily on it for food, livelihood, and culture.
Southeast Asia	The stories can shed light on local consequences and international dynamics regarding illegal fishing, habitat destruction, and marine pollution.
Caribbean	Despite being significantly affected by ocean issues, the region is often not included in ocean literacy programs by global organizations. Coverage could include overfishing, marine pollution, coral reef health, and marine governance.
Indian Ocean Territories	Like the Caribbean, the region is often left out of the discussion despite the prevalence of IUU fishing and marine pollution. Due to its strategic economic importance in marine trade, security and governance merit attention.
West Africa	Important areas of inquiry could include IUU fishing, marine pollution, including oil spills and the prevention of and response to it, as well as maritime security and piracy problems that heavily impact the region's seas.
East Africa	The coastal vulnerability due to climate change, illegal fishing or overfishing, and the challenges in Marine Protected Areas (MPAs) warrant a critical eye on the stories from the region.
China's coast and the Yellow Sea	The country's significant role in global fishing, its large coastline, and marine biodiversity are mentioned. Topics could include fisheries management, MPAs, conservation of endangered species, pollution, and territorial disputes.
Pacific Islands and the Coral Triangle	The impact of climate change on sea-level rise, coral bleaching, and extreme weather events is noted, as well as overfishing, biodiversity protection, and Indigenous rights. Stories giving space for islanders to share their challenges and their own suggested solutions are needed.
The Amazon River Basin	The importance of this river system to the health of the South Atlantic Ocean cannot be overstated, and issues such as deforestation, pollution, and oil exploitation deserve attention.
The Arctic and the Antarctic	The consequences of melting ice caps that go beyond sea-level rise, such as the effects on the livelihoods of Indigenous populations and the potential release of greenhouse gasses, are perceived as underreported.
The High Seas	These areas beyond national jurisdictions are at risk of overexploitation, and even though efforts to establish regulatory frameworks are praised and celebrated, they do not seem to clearly publicize their intrinsic consequences and operational challenges.

Experts acknowledge that most of the regional issues named are widespread, and a few express that a simpler and more economical approach would be supporting journalists in reporting from where they are located, as long as they are able to narrow down topics and that these places have a connection with ocean stories that can demonstrate broader issues.

"Maybe you don't have to go anywhere. I would spend an amount of time, first of all, narrowing the topic and then picking one place where you can demonstrate what's going on. Maybe you can go to China or maybe you can go to Uruguay and spend time there studying why the Chinese fleet in the Atlantic uses Montevideo as their port to support fishing in the Atlantic."

Interview participant

6.3 What to talk about?

As stated, one of the challenges in the work of protecting and preserving the ocean is related to the visible difficulty of including and connecting it to other themes and dimensions crucial to environmental preservation. Therefore, from the point of view of communication and the urgency of the agenda, nothing is more pressing than investing in the connection and understanding of the ocean as a transversal theme, related to various other topics in the environment and society as a whole.

Under this transversality lens, some topics are cited by experts as essential to be addressed. These themes are directly connected to the most emerging problems mentioned at the beginning of this report. Each of these topics is crucial to the development of comprehensive ocean reporting because, together, they provide insights into the complex interactions between human activities and the marine environment, as well as pathways to sustainable ocean management, helping to raise awareness, informing political decisions, and promoting collective actions for environmental preservation globally.

6.4 What has worked well?

Some of the most pressing issues pointed out by experts are also considered to have had good examples of journalistic coverage.

Plastic pollution: Widely covered due to its visibility, simplicity of action, support of legislative action and public readiness for change. Effective reporting on plastic pollution includes powerful visual images of animals being harmed, clear narratives, and clear, objective discussions of legislative efforts and personal actions to address the issue.

“Regarding the issue of plastic, I have been trying to reflect a lot on this question, and I think that persistence, insistence, right, I think it's resistance, resilience—all these terms together—are what made plastic pollution an agenda that succeeded in terms of spreading information and engagement.”

Interview participant

Poor fisheries management: Although there is still a lot to do and talk about the issue of fishing, some experts claim that, particularly in Africa, this issue receives good coverage due to journalists' familiarity with the opacity and corruption surrounding decision-making processes in the field of fisheries. Effective reporting resonates with local populations impacted by these policies, holding decision-makers accountable and advocating for transparency and sustainability.

“There are a lot of issues, like the opacity of how the decision-makers are doing. The journalists know that, like, decision-makers in Africa are a little bit... It's about corruption. This is something that they know very well. So, the journalists can talk about corruption.”

Interview participant

Marine Protected Areas (MPAs): The “30x30” initiative to protect 30% of the land, fresh waters, and ocean by 2030 receives good coverage due to its clear and focused objective, backed by broad public support for nature conservation. Effective reporting on this issue communicates the scientific reasoning, benefits, challenges, and diverse perspectives involved in establishing MPAs. These reports also point to solutions, which brings a more optimistic perspective to the public.

“We know that sometimes (there is) negative news and people just give up, and so on. So, there's that argument. So, people are looking for more hopeful news, right?”

Interview participant

6.5 What needs to be talked about?

When encouraged to speak spontaneously about topics that should be included in ocean reports, experts cite themes of different dimensions.

Graphic 29 | Topics to be reported, according to experts

Climate Change and Ocean Health	These topics explore the multifaceted impacts of climate change on the ocean, including sea level rise, ocean acidification, coral bleaching, and changing marine ecosystems. They emphasize the role of the ocean in climate regulation and the urgent need to mitigate climate change to preserve ocean health.
Sustainable Resource Management and Governance	Discussions about sustainable fisheries, marine protected areas, ocean governance, and policy highlight the importance of effective management strategies to ensure long-term ocean health and productivity. These topics examine the regulatory frameworks, international agreements, and community engagement necessary for sustainable ocean management.
Education, Awareness, and Engagement	Focused on promoting ocean literacy, raising public awareness, and engaging diverse stakeholders, these topics highlight the importance of promoting a culture of ocean stewardship. They highlight the role of education, outreach, and communication in inspiring behavioral changes and mobilizing collective action for ocean conservation.
Innovation and Solutions	These topics showcase innovative technologies, research efforts, and successful conservation initiatives aimed at addressing ocean challenges. They demonstrate the potential for technological innovation, community-led solutions, and collaborative efforts to drive positive change and promote sustainable ocean management.
Politics and International Cooperation	Discussions on international frameworks, legislation, and cooperation mechanisms highlight the importance of global collaboration in addressing transboundary ocean issues. They examine the effectiveness of existing policies and advocate for stronger governance structures to protect the ocean and its resources.
Inclusivity and Justice in Conservation Efforts	Conservation efforts must be inclusive and just, considering the social and cultural dimensions of ocean reliance. Valuing and integrating diverse knowledge systems, including gender perspectives, the African diaspora, and Indigenous knowledge, is vital to ensure equitable conservation outcomes.
Environmental Impact and Conservation	Addressing issues such as overfishing, pollution, habitat destruction, and biodiversity loss. These topics highlight the critical need to protect ecosystems and marine species. They highlight the interconnectedness of human activities with ocean health and emphasize the importance of sustainable management practices.

EQUITY, SOCIAL JUSTICE, DIVERSITY, AND INCLUSION

By highlighting perspectives that go beyond the perceptions and experiences of Europe and the United States, as well as Indigenous, riverside, and local communities, these topics emphasize the need for fairer, more inclusive, and equitable approaches and discussions for sea conservation.

"Yeah, in fisheries, that's a huge sector where often women work in unofficial processing roles. So, I think there's something like one in two seafood sector workers is a woman, but they are often without attention and with quite poor working conditions. And that's an aspect that I think doesn't get enough of a spotlight."

Interview participant

Voices from Underrepresented Regions Include stories from the Global South, Africa, SIDS, and regions outside North America and Europe. The Global South and African regions have specific experiences and demands in relation to the ocean that need to be heard and reported. Many communities in the Global South and Africa have deep traditional knowledge about the ocean, including sustainable fishing practices, marine resource management, and biodiversity conservation. Integrating this local knowledge with scientific approaches can lead to more effective and culturally appropriate solutions for ocean conservation.

Local Community Impact

How ocean policies affect local fisherfolk, Indigenous peoples, and small-scale fish processors, particularly women. According to experts, it is necessary to discuss policies that establish marine protection areas so that, even though intended to be protective, they do not restrict local fisherfolk's access to traditional fishing areas, reducing their sources of subsistence and income. This can be especially harmful to Indigenous communities who rely heavily on fishing for their survival. In many cases, ocean policies can conflict with the territorial and traditional use rights of Indigenous communities. This can lead to disputes over the management of marine resources and the marginalization of local communities in decision-making.

Another important aspect that deserves attention from journalists concerns gender and social roles. Women play a crucial role in fishing and fish processing in many coastal communities. Telling their stories and experiences can help ocean policies account for the different needs and challenges faced by women.

Cultural Significance

The ocean is not only a source of natural resources, but also a vital component of the cultural heritage and practices of many communities around the world. According to those interviewed, it is fundamental and fair that the fact that the ocean plays such a role is acknowledged and appreciated by the public. From its importance as a primary source of food and subsistence to its role in local expressions and traditional knowledge, the sea influences and is influenced by the cultural practices of the people who live nearby. Maritime navigation, fishing techniques, and coastal architecture are some examples of the ways in which the ocean shapes communities' ways of life and cultural identities.



PUBLIC POLICIES

International Cooperation

Several important international regulatory frameworks aimed at addressing ocean protection were mentioned:

United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS): This convention sets guidelines for how nations use the world's seas and resources.

Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD): Agreement that aims to conserve biological diversity, promote the sustainable use of its components and ensure the fair distribution of the benefits of genetic resources.

International Maritime Organization (IMO) Regulations: Establishes standards for the safety and environmental performance of international maritime transport.

Paris Agreement: Although primarily focused on climate change, it has implications for ocean protection due to the interconnectedness of climate systems and ocean health.

Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs): Specifically, SDG 14 aims to conserve and sustainably use the ocean, seas, and marine resources for sustainable development.

Marine Protected Areas (MPAs): Designated areas where human activity is restricted to protect ecosystems and biodiversity.

BBNJ Agreement (Biodiversity Beyond National Jurisdiction), or the High Seas Treaty: Addresses the conservation and sustainable use of marine biological diversity in areas outside national jurisdiction.

These frameworks are designed to provide legal and regulatory structures to promote ocean conservation and the sustainable use of marine resources. However, their effectiveness varies depending on factors such as political will, execution capacity, financial resources, and international cooperation. Experts raise concerns about the gap between international regulations and local actions, particularly in countries where implementation and enforcement can be challenging. Furthermore, slow progress in implementing agreements such as the High Seas Treaty highlights the need for continued advocacy and cooperation to effectively address ocean protection.

There are also scholars who emphasize the importance of inclusion in these frameworks, suggesting that Indigenous knowledge and young people's voices must play a more integral role in decision-making processes to improve effectiveness and ensure that all stakeholders are represented. In summary, although several international regulatory frameworks are in place to address ocean protection, their effectiveness depends on several factors. One of them is the pressure that civil society and opinion makers need to exert so that public policies are implemented effectively. These interested parties need to know how to pressure and demand answers, and good ocean journalism can make a significant difference on how these interactions take place.

"But at the same time, it is linked to a universal problem or problems that often need to be tackled internationally, through international laws and treaties and things like that. They (the problems) all then need to be translated back to the impact on local people. So, I could imagine this kind of network being powerful both in terms of finding local stories, information, and spokespeople. And then reporting in national and local press as well as feeding into more international coverage and things like that. So, I think then, in turn, that would help build a picture across the different audiences who read the various articles, of these being universal problems."

Interview participant

A path of no return: Interaction between local and global actions

Experts believe a multifaceted approach is essential to safeguard the ocean, encompassing international cooperation, local action, and the development of innovative policies. International treaties are crucial, urging all nations to sign and enforce agreements designed to protect significant portions of the ocean. However, addressing specific regional challenges such as pollution and overfishing requires adapted policies and balanced decision-making that prioritizes environmental protection alongside socioeconomic interests.

Effective and less complex communication is key to increasing public awareness of ocean issues, linking them to broader environmental concerns such as climate change. Building connections between ocean conservation and social issues promotes understanding and engagement among diverse audiences. Supporting research, highlighting success stories, and promoting international cooperation further strengthens conservation efforts.

Additionally, policies must defend sustainable industrial practices, end harmful subsidies, and encourage innovation in technology and resource management. Adopting an ecosystem approach and combating illegal fishing activities are crucial steps toward sustainable ocean management. Pollution reduction strategies, community engagement, and science-based management also figure prominently in comprehensive ocean protection policies. In essence, collaborative efforts between governments, industries, NGOs, scientists, and local communities are imperative to ensure the sustainability and well-being of our ocean for present and future generations.

INDUSTRY

When discussing the impact of businesses and which are the most profitable activities exploiting the ocean, interviewees name the fishing industry first, followed by the oil and gas industry and the shipping sector.

Fishing Industry: Large-scale industrial fishing operations are highlighted as the entities that profit most from the ocean. They benefit from government policies, subsidies, and regulations.

Oil and Gas Industry: Offshore oil and gas development and deep-sea mining sectors also derive substantial profits from ocean resources, made possible by government policies and licenses.

Shipping Industry: The global shipping industry benefits greatly from transporting goods across vast distances, connecting global markets, and enabling international trade at a lower cost than air or land routes.

Enabling Industries: Supporting industries such as shipbuilding, marine equipment manufacturing, marine service providers, and financial institutions that invest in ocean-related ventures also profit indirectly from ocean activities.

“At the moment, it's the industry. [It] is developing faster than the regulations can be put in place.”

Interview participant

The specialists do not deny that these industries offer a range of economic and political advantages, such as extracting vital resources, facilitating trade, and providing essential services, which contribute significantly to the global economy. However, the debate over who profits most from the ocean raises important considerations and questions. These can guide conversations and discussions with various sectors interested in protecting the ocean:

ENVIRONMENTAL AND SOCIOECONOMIC IMPACT

Resource Management: How are resources extracted from the ocean managed to ensure sustainability and avoid depletion?

Environmental Impact: What are the environmental consequences of profitable ocean activities such as overfishing, habitat destruction, pollution, and climate change?

Equity and Social Impact: Are profits from ocean activities distributed equitably among stakeholders, including coastal communities, Indigenous peoples, and future generations?

Regulation and Governance: What policies and regulations exist to govern profitable ocean industries and how effective are they in balancing economic interests and environmental protection?

Sustainable Practices: How can industries that profit from the ocean adopt more sustainable practices to minimize negative impacts and ensure long-term viability?

Discussing these aspects can help promote a deeper understanding of the complex dynamics surrounding ocean profitability and inform efforts to promote sustainable ocean management and conservation.

Environmental and socioeconomic impacts connect and influence each other. Therefore, it is necessary to think about these aspects and discuss their dimensions in an integrated way. And it is in this integrated way, according to experts, that reports on the topics need to be presented to the public.

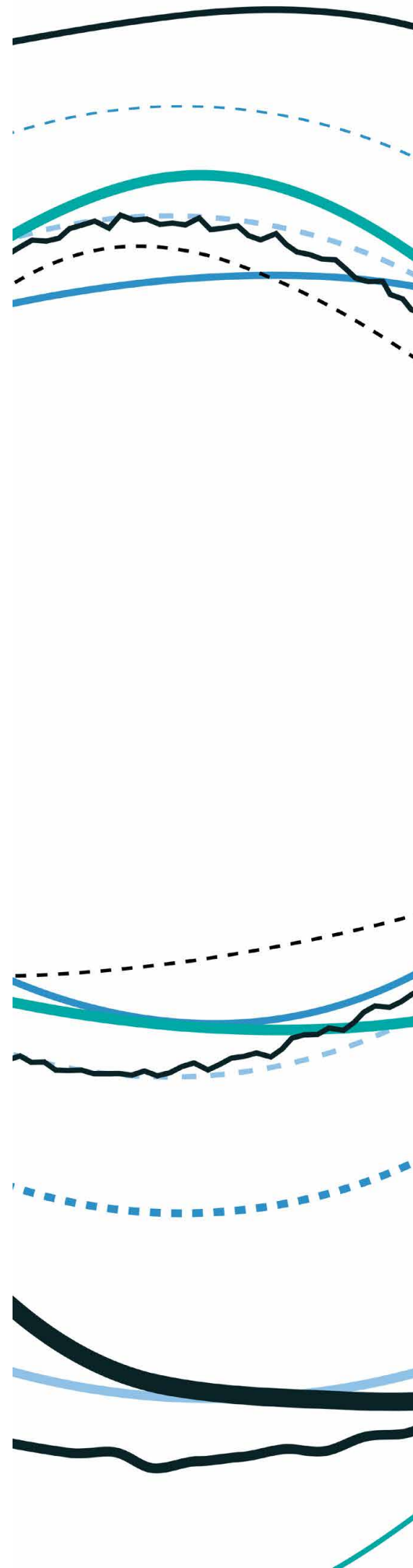
Without greater protection of the ocean, several significant impacts are expected to occur, both environmentally and economically. Food insecurity due to overfishing will force communities to migrate in search of better opportunities. Furthermore, environmental degradation, such as habitat destruction and acidification, threatens the balance of marine ecosystems. Continued exploration could result in vast areas of the ocean losing life, leaving them resembling deserts on land. The ocean's crucial role in regulating the climate and absorbing carbon dioxide could be compromised, worsening global warming and contributing to sea level rise, which would directly affect coastal communities, especially in developing countries. Economic instability worsens as coastal economies, heavily dependent on sea-related industries, begin to suffer significant losses.

Indigenous populations, with deep cultural ties to the ocean and traditional fishing practices, will also face significant challenges. These communities often lack alternative sources of income, exacerbating their vulnerability to changes in marine ecosystems. Small Island Developing States (SIDS), highly dependent on the ocean for food security, employment, and income, will be particularly vulnerable. These regions, which already face economic challenges and limited resources, will have difficulty adapting to declining fish stocks and damaged marine habitats. The economic vulnerability of SIDS is further aggravated by their geographic isolation and susceptibility to the impacts of climate change, such as rising sea levels and extreme weather events.

In this context, a certain criticism of the blue economy still stands out. Some interviewees emphasize the reinforcement of a neoliberal capitalist system. They argue that the prevailing economic focus on the blue economy overlooks the social and cultural aspects of ocean governance. They also note that the push for marine protected areas and conservation often disregards existing community protection efforts and fails to prioritize the well-being of Indigenous and local communities. Despite the ideals of "sustainable use" and "preserving ocean health" in its concept, the reality of the blue economy still frequently prioritizes profit and exploitation over sustainable management of marine resources and the inclusion of marginalized voices. They express skepticism about the potential for a truly sustainable blue economy and advocate for an approach that genuinely addresses sustainability in all dimensions of ocean governance.

"It's so far from the rest of the countries (that are) not connected to the realities of fishers and communities along the coast. They (policymakers) haven't even connected with fishers and communities that will be the most affected by these policies, that will be most affected by the blue economy and this kind of focus that they're pushing. And, yeah, we've been working in Kenya now too, and it's the same. They're in Nairobi, and they're not connected to the realities of the communities along the coast that will be the most affected."

Interview participant



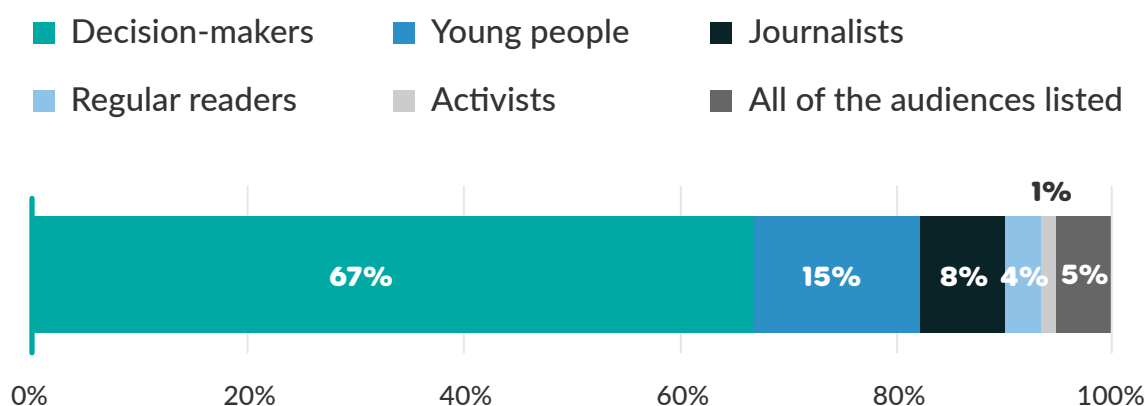
6.6 Who should listen?

Crafting informative, accessible, and engaging stories is not a task considered simple or straightforward by the experts. Besides the regional and issue-related specificities that might require tailored approaches, it is unlikely that the same tale will appeal to all relevant audiences all at once. The specialists emphasize that understanding the right public to target with which type of stories is highly contextual and that journalists should rely on their own knowledge, as well as on the relevant sources, to optimize the impact of their pieces. Nonetheless, some of the key audiences for ocean reporting were discussed during the interviews.

Decision-Makers and Policymakers

Decision- and policymakers are the first stakeholders to be mentioned in any discussion about impactful reporting for holding the power to create laws, allocate resources, and make administrative or operational decisions to protect the ocean and the communities whose livelihood depends on it. Government officials and bodies at various levels are also the main target audience for investigative stories according to two out of three journalists (67%). Some of the experts argue that compelling stories for a broader audience will also capture the attention of their political and administrative leaders. Yet, suggestions such as focusing on the interconnectedness of local ocean-related events with global issues, framing stories to resonate with people's (voters') daily lives and concerns, and maintaining a consistent spotlight on issues that have not received the necessary attention (which could be significantly aided by empowering local journalists) are proposed as potential ways to engage. Stories showing how laws and policies on ocean management lead to positive outcomes for marine lives and communities could also have a strong appeal.

Graphic 30 | Audiences that should be targeted with ocean investigative stories (N=78)



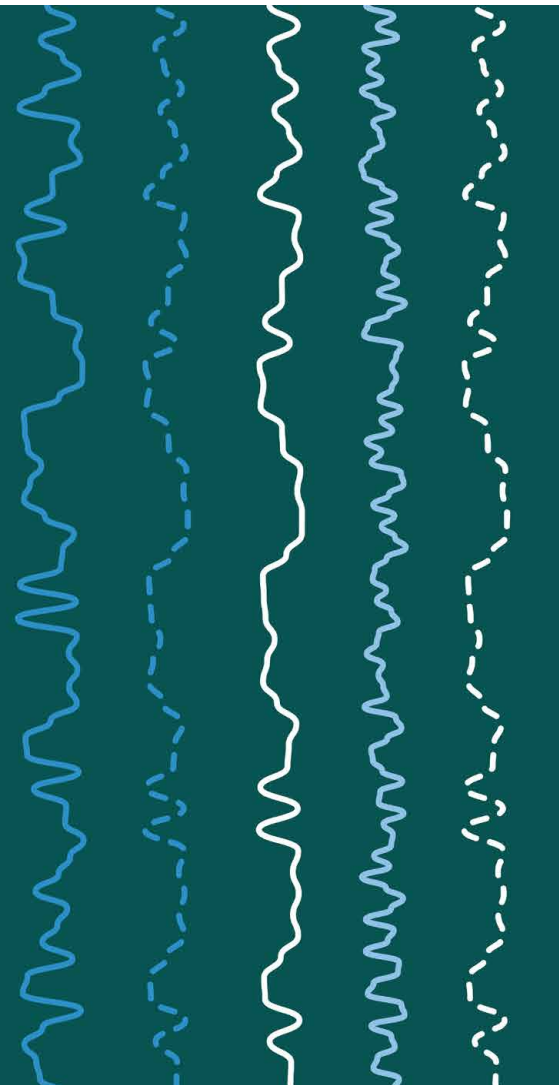
Local Communities and Indigenous Peoples

Those who live in coastal areas and whose livelihood and culture depend on the ocean are often aware of the issues and, above that, equipped with valuable insights on real impacts and potential solutions. But more than being given a seat at the table that plans and executes conservation, there is value in targeting ocean stories to the coastal communities since they are directly affected by ocean policies and health. The idea behind this argument is that keeping communities well-informed in an era of quickly spreading fake news could be vital to empower them when facing challenges such as the imposition of top-down solutions. Moreover, being aware of the developments of similar issues from other parts of the world can strengthen their own deep connection with marine environments and help foster creative answers to their own problems.

Consumers and the General Public

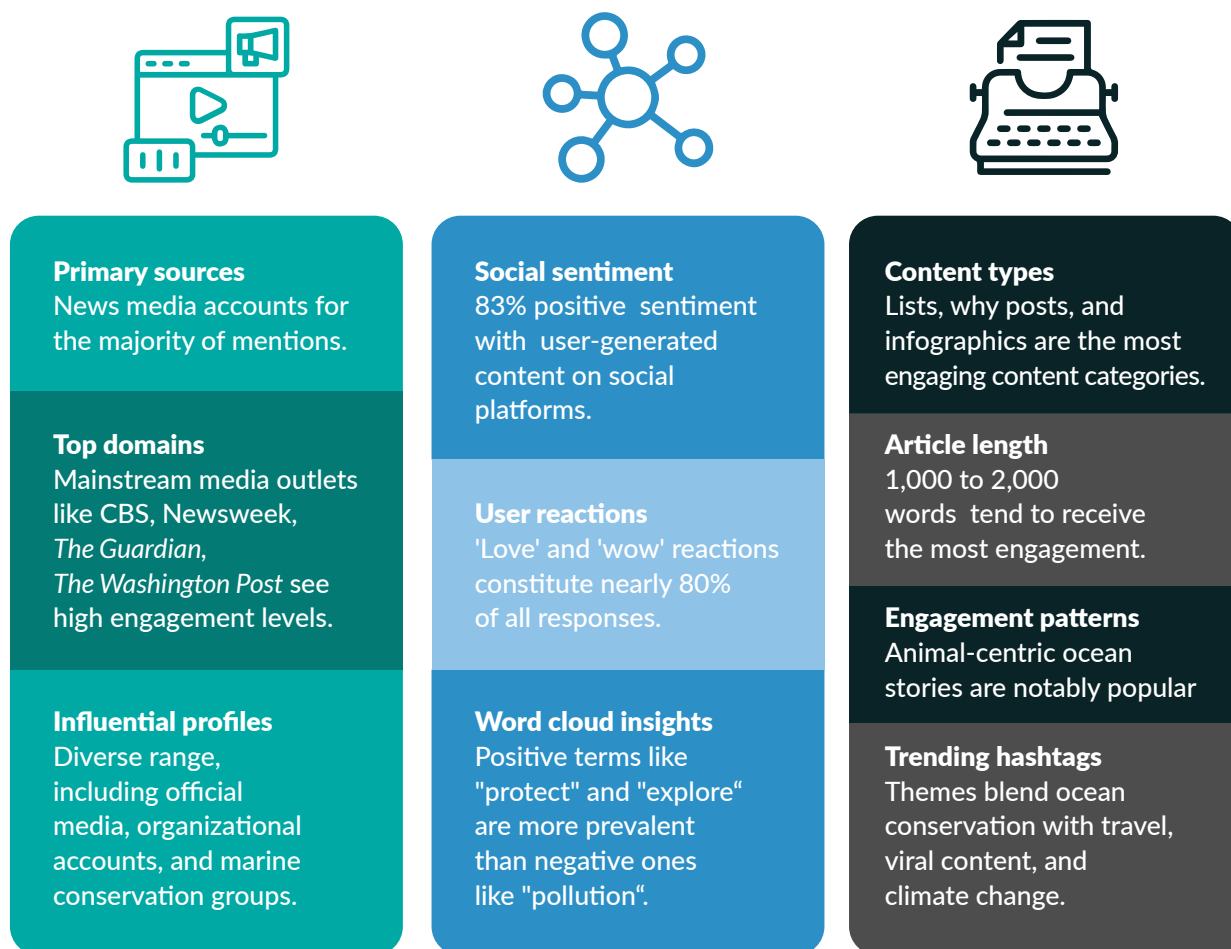
Although there is a consensus about the urgent need to improve ocean literacy among the general public, a few of the experts question how effective it is to aim at engaging this audience in all types of ocean stories. Among journalists, only 4% mention regular readers as the main target for investigative stories. There is no discussion that the everyday choices of the regular consumer are part of the problem and, for their potential influence on policy changes and market demands, a big part of the solution. Most of the suggestions involve first trying to establish a connection of the general population with the topic since more complex or detailed information may alienate them. Stories that could effectively convey how ocean problems affect the cost and availability of their food, the weather they are facing, or their plans for the next beach vacation are proposed, especially if they can aggregate educational content and actionable information on what people can do to help. In that sense, even though a lot of the information consumed by the general reader today comes from social media, the media mapping study shows that traditional media is ubiquitous in starting and shaping narratives about ocean topics on the internet.

There is a prevalence of positive sentiment surrounding ocean-themed digital dialogue, which could represent a multifaceted scenario. First, it likely means that talking about the ocean in itself elicits positive associations in most people, improving the chances of engagement with strong storytelling. Secondly, it can also represent some lassitude in engaging in more difficult or polemic topics, either for lack of interest, knowledge, or willingness to navigate through the cognitive dissonance of causes and effects of these issues. Finally, it is a reminder that even though the study of online versus offline behavior has advanced in the past decade, there is still much to be discovered in terms of what happens behind or beyond the screens. However, the weight of social media has already been established enough to indicate that there is no engaging the general public without them. With that in mind, some suggestions can be drawn from the media mapping study in terms of format, content, and tone.



Graphic 31

Summary of audience reactions, preferences, and content strategies for the digital dialogue about ocean issues



Scientists, NGOs, and International Organizations

Albeit belonging to different groups, these can be considered an educated and interested audience for ocean stories. Engagement, in this case, represents seeking alliances or creating pieces that bring about critical thinking about the issues. Researchers who study marine ecosystems can provide crucial data and insights but are very critical of the depth and accuracy of the current reporting, resulting in some skepticism about media outlets as a source of information. Environmental advocacy groups have extensive expertise in conservation and public awareness campaigns, and although they see the media as a potential ally, there is an underlying impression of bias towards misguided interests.

International and intergovernmental organizations have a key role in setting standards and facilitating agreements between nations, as well as funding and developing educational programs, which implies that stories that resonate with this audience have the potential to start or strengthen widespread waves of planning and action. These profiles represent most of the interviewed experts for the qualitative study, and they show a preponderant willingness to contribute with journalists for improved coverage of ocean stories. Moreover, there is an expectation that the media can also support their own fight for ocean health when it follows the principles they value.

Business and Industry

Business practices have the potential to either significantly harm or help ocean sustainability and to be greatly affected by ocean issues for their own survival. Industries such as fishing, shipping, tourism, and the energy sector are perceived as keenly aware of their impact on the marine environment and of the regulations in place. Yet, their engagement with the ocean community in general is questioned, and experts believe that stories should focus on conveying the long-term benefits of truly adopting sustainable methods. To accomplish that, the narratives should include successful examples and encourage industries to take responsibility for their impact and show genuine allyship with conservation efforts.

Youth and Activists

Young people and environmental activists were consistently mentioned by the interviewed specialists when discussing engagement and actual impact for ocean stories. These publics are seen as dynamic and influential forces in society, who are often at the forefront of technological development and adoption, continually stewarding social movements. Hence, the perception is that much of the significant change that can benefit the future of the planet lies on their shoulders. The consequences of current environmental actions (or the lack thereof) will be the inheritance of today's youth, making it crucial that they are educated and engaged in conservation from an early age. In fact, for 15% of the journalists participating in the survey, young people should be the main target for investigative stories (Graphic 30, page 48). In turn, activists and environmental organizations can use well-reported stories to inform their advocacy or awareness campaigns, to mobilize public support, and to hold decision-makers accountable for their actions and inactions. Both audiences are recognized by their energy, passion, and the ability to communicate well across different platforms. By engaging with them, journalists might be able to amplify the impact of their stories.

Media and Journalists

...and How They Tell Their Stories

A small portion of journalists (8%, see Graphic 30) pointed to their own peers as a target for investigative ocean stories, a sentiment that was not expressed directly by the interviewed specialists. The latter emphasized the role of the media in scrutinizing and disseminating information in a format that can reach all the relevant stakeholders, which requires a familiarity with the topics that both journalists and experts tend to see as often lacking in current reporting. It is likely that survey participants had an educational perspective in mind when they named themselves as the most relevant audience, considering how enriching it could be to share outlooks, knowledge, and narrative styles that would benefit their reporting. In that sense, some of the experts suggest types of narratives that could engage and inspire different target groups, making the stories more relatable in varying contexts.

Solutions-oriented reporting

Stories focusing on successful conservation efforts, sustainable practices, and positive actions can inspire hope and provide a roadmap for change.

Personal stories showing how individuals and communities are affected by ocean issues can create an emotional connection and make the topic more real and relatable.

Human interest & local impact**Visual storytelling**

Compelling imagery, videos, and infographics can make complex topics more accessible and engaging, especially for audiences that may not be reached through traditional written reports.

Informative pieces that increase ocean literacy and explain the significance of the ocean to global health and climate regulation can help build a more knowledgeable audience.

Educational content**Actionable information**

Reporting that shows examples of what individuals and communities can do to contribute to ocean sustainability can empower audiences to take action.

In-depth reporting that uncovers new information or brings to light underreported aspects of ocean conservation can pique public interest and elicit positive reaction.

Investigative journalism**Ocean health & climate change**

Linking ocean health and broader environmental issues like climate change can help people understand the relevance of marine conservation to their own lives.

Connecting global ocean issues to local impacts can make them more relatable and show how they affect everyone, not just those living near the coast.

Localizing stories



Delineating Impact

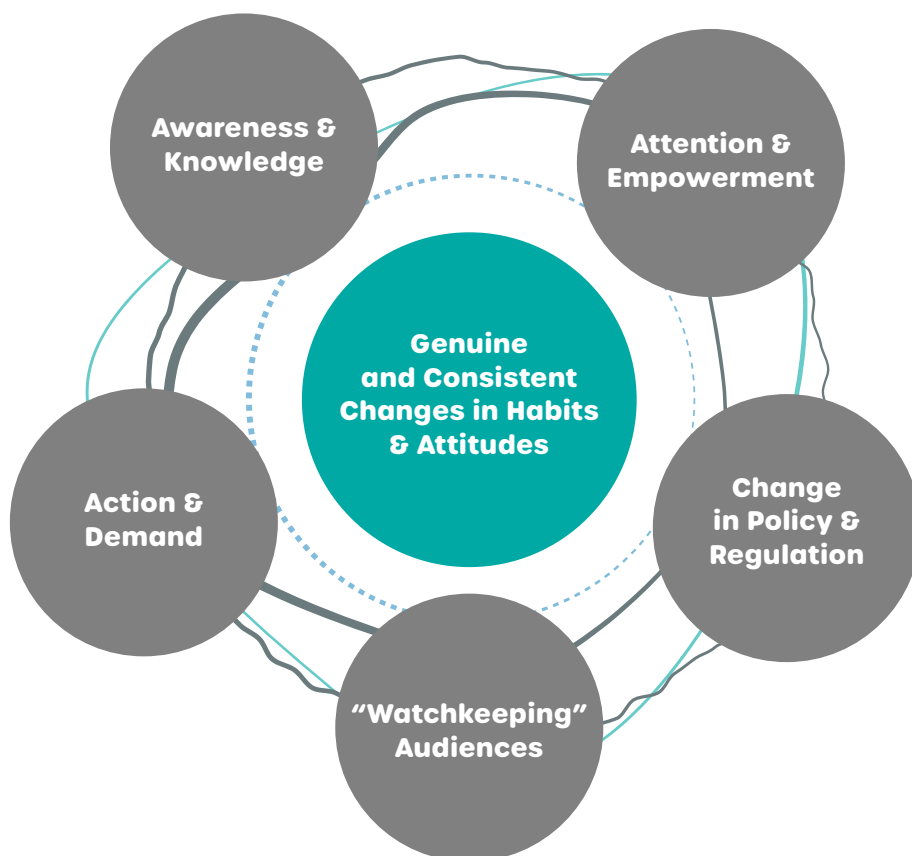
A great part of the attempts by experts to define coverage impact revolves around the dynamics of getting topics into the spotlight of the public agenda so that meaningful action can take place. The first and most ubiquitously expected outcome is raising awareness and educating the public, including general citizens and policymakers, about ocean issues. True successful impact, however, goes beyond attention, according to specialists. It is conveyed in the quality of the engagement the coverage incites, one that moves audiences into action, either by adopting more sustainable behaviors themselves or by assertively demanding it from industries and decision-makers.

Even the most skeptical experts tend to agree that media exposure is highly influential in policy changes. But regardless of how doubtful they are in terms of political and business intentions, many believe that well-crafted stories can lead to long-standing shifts in governance practices, besides legislative reforms. Furthermore, the power of investigative reporting in exposing bad actors is perceived as significant in terms of bringing environmental malpractices to light and holding those responsible to account. Ultimately, there is a sense that the watchdog mindset intrinsic to journalists can somehow be imparted to the audiences, leading to a society fully engaged with ocean health and conservation issues.

“When you work with public policy, the media and good reporting have an essential role because often the decision-makers do not necessarily need votes; however, if society is seriously talking about an issue, they will have to discuss and decide about it. So, I think improved coverage can impact in terms of qualifying and moving decisions along in municipal, state, or federal administrations.”

Interview participant

Graphic 33 | The chain of impact of good ocean reporting



The drivers of this desired impact are what experts consider elements of improved coverage overall, such as accurate, detailed, and well-informed reports, ground reporting from underrepresented regions to provide an authentic view of local issues, strategic storytelling balancing attention-grabbing content with compelling educational information, the use of visual tools and social media platforms to boost reach and engagement, and journalists trained to produce nuanced reporting that resonates with a larger audience. Multiple participants have also stressed the importance of collaboration among journalists, scientists, and communities for powerful reporting.

The point where some of the experts disagree is related to the focus on positive or harrowing narratives to inspire change. While some advocate for solution-based stories that could encourage action, others emphasize that exposing threats and wrongdoings could be more effective, shocking audiences into a reaction. Nonetheless, there is a collective endorsement for improved reporting aiming to inform, empower, and mobilize diverse global audiences for the protection of the ocean. And building capacity for that to happen involves training initiatives for journalists, integrating young and local voices, strategic planning of coverage waves at intervals to maximize public perception and influence on policy, and supporting the continuous coverage of existing data and research to minimize the chances of investing in stories that will be wrapping tomorrow's fish and chips.

7.1 Measuring Success

An important part of delineating the impact of good reporting for the experts lies in understanding what kind of metrics will be used to determine the size and quality of said impact. For this typically methodic group of specialists, the evidence of a successful project can only be measured if there is a baseline scenario and a way to monitor progress. Failing to do so would incur the risk of wasting resources, and the communication efforts to align audiences with ocean conservation causes are too important for that to happen. Suggestions range from longitudinal monitoring of the number of articles to a more

qualitative assessment of their content, from gathering metrics of ocean literacy in national surveys to monitoring changes in governance and legislation in relation to the volume and frequency of reporting. Additionally, there is an expectation that initiatives such as the ORN will present clear goals as to what they want to achieve, with success potentially represented by systemic changes in how media outlets cover ocean issues and how the public engages with them. The ongoing monitoring of that alone, in theory, would indicate the impact of the programs and even the need for them to be in place.

Graphic 34 | Suggested measurements of impact



Public interest & engagement metrics

Using social media interactions, article frequency, and referencing by decision-makers as indicators of public engagement.

Policy reform & corporate actions

Monitoring changes in policies and business practices impacted by investigative reporting.

Funding influences

The effect on philanthropic funding toward ocean conservation projects can indicate impact of coverage.

Community and stakeholder feedback

Including local community voices and reactions helps assess the resonance and effectiveness of reporting.



8

A Broader Picture

Image by Loren Holmes/Anchorage Daily News, United States, 2023

8.1 The Scientific Community

When asked to shift the spotlight to the academic community and how universities can further explore ocean-related topics to provide robust and reliable data to advance the discussion in the public agenda, the experts propose a variety of approaches that they still find lacking in current research. In a nutshell, this includes expanding course offerings in marine-related fields and promoting interdisciplinary studies that bridge natural sciences with policy, economics, and social sciences for a more holistic understanding of the issues. Universities should provide ample research opportunities and foster partnerships with external organizations for hands-on experience. Promoting seminars and workshops both on campus and for the wider community could be an opportunity for engagement.

Besides furthering the more technical aspect of education about ocean issues, a few experts also highlight the importance of gathering more scientific data on the social aspect of the matter.

Understanding the nuances of habits and attitudes towards conservation is key to the development of educational programs for ocean literacy and communication strategies to convey to different audiences the significance of the ocean and their ecosystems for life on the planet.

"I think there just needs to be more social science. I feel like, at the moment, social science is really on the periphery, a kind of social science around behavioral change linked to the ocean."

Interview participant

Furthermore, effective communication training for scientists and conservationists is also mentioned by a few of the specialists as a suppressed demand that is essential to ensure their work is disseminated effectively and efficiently to the broader public. There is an awareness that while they are asking journalists to convey complex scientific information in an accessible manner, the research community could also enhance their own skills as communicators to make their work approachable and engaging.

8.2 Public Outreach

The specialists interviewed believe that events organized around key dates such as World Ocean Day could help increase visibility about ocean issues. Indeed, the media cloud study found peaks in the search for "ocean" in 2023 and 2024 around that date, as well as a spike in interest for "plastic pollution" close to World Environment Day. Rather than having it brought about once a year, though, the ideal scenario would be planning a continuing program starting or culminating in a special date so that the outcomes (in interest and engagement) could be more long-term.

The media cloud study also identified increased attention to ocean-related keywords on dates surrounding negotiations of treaties or the release of important scientific studies. The experts alert that the coverage surrounding these types of content is often either too complex and alienating for a broader audience, or too shallow and lacking in conveying the core points of interest. Therefore, there seems to be an opportunity for producing stories that will capitalize on the attention on those dates, helping readers dig into what such documents represent for their own lives and the aspects of ocean health that affect their communities.

More traditional initiatives such as educational workshops, beach cleanups, public lectures, and interactive exhibits are recalled as effective ways to engage and inform the public. Additionally, popular culture phenomena can help create brief windows of opportunity for education and action. Events like music or cultural festivals, movie or documentary releases, and art installations can capture the attention of a wider audience and help build an emotional connection to ocean conservation. Social media influencers are also relevant, including not only those already geared towards ocean-related themes but also lifestyle accounts (e.g., chefs, trainers, healthcare professionals), artists, athletes, sports clubs, and even child-focused channels for age-appropriate educational content. These profiles can start meaningful discussions about pressing issues, boosting interest and engagement.

"I think people like to be entertained, right? Whether it's through music, Netflix, or other types of art, through sports and going to nature, you know? ... I do think that there are a lot of opportunities to bring a lot of these ocean stories into that."

Interview participant



9

Conclusions

The pivotal role of the ocean in environmental sustainability, although underscored by the interviewed specialists, is still an underdeveloped topic in mainstream media in all its complexity and the ramifications of ignoring ocean health and conservation efforts. The lag in coverage is justified by two main problems. From a business perspective, a vicious cycle is drawn where media professionals need more funds, training, and support to pursue stories, and media consumers need to show more interest, knowledge, and engagement with the topics to justify the investment of resources in them. Within a citizenship view, there is an impression that the problems affecting the ocean are literally out to sea, which makes them less of a priority in daily lives.

The interconnectedness of the ocean with climate change, human rights, and economic stability is highlighted, as well as the impact of ocean health on various aspects of life. Nonetheless, ocean stories are persistently categorized as niche topics or special features within environmental sections. They peak around particular dates and events, then seem to be sidelined as if such concern could be paused in favor of other more pressing topics. Therefore, the experts believe there is a clear demand for comprehensive storytelling to convey the essential connection of the ocean with livelihoods, culture, and the overall well-being of any population.

Experts and journalists agree that current media coverage often falls short in fostering a deeper understanding of ocean issues. Despite some impactful journalism, there is a general consensus that stories lack complexity and fail to maintain consistent attention to the subject. Limited ocean literacy, budget constraints, and difficulties accessing sources on the ground hinder journalists' ability to produce in-depth and engaging content. A certain skepticism about interests behind stories leads the more informed audiences, especially scientists and activists, to hesitate in following or recommending mainstream media outlets.

Good reporting on ocean topics is characterized by scientific accuracy, inclusion of diverse perspectives, and powerful imagery. These elements are essential for creating impactful narratives that resonate with audiences and inspire action. To influence decision-makers and be regarded as valuable platforms in aiding conservation efforts, media outlets and reporters must focus on maintaining a trusted reputation, backed by science and relevant sources and, more importantly, fostering critical reflection about the issues. Additionally, there is room for more compelling visuals that could offer fresher and more engaging perspectives on ocean stories.

The study reveals a pressing need for improved ocean literacy among both journalists and the general public. There is optimism that high-quality, well-framed stories can alter the current scenario, making ocean issues more relatable and inspiring proactive engagement. Plastic pollution coverage serves as a benchmark for raising awareness and demonstrates the potential for other urgent problems to gain similar attention through persistent and strategic communication efforts. Experts suggest that effective ocean reporting should target underrepresented regions and marginalized voices, particularly those most affected by overexploitation and degradation. Stories should be tailored to resonate with specific audiences, including policymakers, local communities, consumers, scientists, NGOs, businesses, youth, and activists. Engaging these stakeholders through strategic storytelling can amplify the impact of journalism and mobilize support for ocean protection.

A myriad of narratives could be explored to tell these tales. Experts believe solution-oriented pieces or ones that provide actionable information, stories highlighting the human and local aspects of the issues, and accessible educational content could be the most engaging in general, as long as facts are accurate and visual aids are compelling. There is an understanding that each issue, audience, and region might require a tailored approach, but the expert suggestions can be summarized in the table below.

Graphic 35**Suggested narratives and approaches per target audience**

Decision-Makers and Policymakers	<p>Policy Impact Stories: Focus on how ocean policies affect ecosystems, economies, and communities. Highlight successful case studies where policy changes led to positive outcomes.</p> <p>Investigative Reports: Expose malpractices, corruption, or inefficiencies in ocean governance and suggest actionable policy recommendations.</p>
Local Communities and Indigenous Peoples	<p>Community-Centric Narratives: Share stories about how ocean health directly impacts local livelihoods, culture, and traditions.</p> <p>Empowerment Stories: Cover initiatives where communities have successfully managed their marine resources or protected their coastal environments.</p>
Consumers and the General Public	<p>Relatable Impact Stories: Explain how ocean issues affect everyday life, such as food security, weather patterns, and recreation.</p> <p>Actionable Content: Provide practical tips on how individuals can contribute to ocean conservation through lifestyle choices.</p>
Business and Industry Leaders	<p>Sustainability Success Stories: Report on companies that have implemented sustainable practices and seen economic benefits.</p> <p>Industry Challenges: Discuss the long-term risks to industries like fishing, shipping, and tourism if ocean degradation continues.</p>
Youth and Activists	<p>Inspirational Stories: Highlight young activists making a difference in ocean conservation to inspire others.</p> <p>Educational Content: Develop stories that inform about ocean science and the importance of biodiversity, tailored to engage younger audiences.</p>
Scientists, NGOs, and International Organizations	<p>Research Highlights: Translate complex scientific research into digestible stories that showcase the latest findings and their implications.</p> <p>Collaboration Spotlights: Feature partnerships between organizations working on innovative solutions for ocean-related challenges.</p>
Media and Journalists	<p>Behind-the-Scenes Insights: Share the process of investigative journalism in ocean reporting, including challenges and successes.</p> <p>Peer Learning: Create content that helps journalists learn from each other's experiences and best practices in covering ocean stories.</p>

The impact of better ocean coverage is expected to be seen in increased awareness, knowledge, and engagement of the audiences, particularly if it leads to positive changes in policy, regulation, and overall behavior towards conservation. For measuring said impact, experts suggest a variety of metrics, including article volume, content quality, audience engagement, and changes in governance and legislation. Continuous monitoring and clear goals are essential for assessing the effectiveness of reporting initiatives and steering efforts to optimize results.

Overall, the study emphasizes the vital role of media in bridging the gap between science, policy, and the public. To accomplish this, a concerted effort is required to provide journalists with the tools and knowledge they need to tell compelling ocean stories. That means addressing the identified gaps in coverage, improving ocean literacy, and fostering collaboration among journalists, scientists, and communities. Success will be measured not only by increased awareness but also by tangible changes in behavior, policy, and governance practices that contribute to the long-term health of our ocean.

9.1 Next Steps

Summarizing the findings of the study, several strategic areas emerge to maximize the impact and effectiveness of initiatives such as the Ocean Reporting Network to create a network of informed and skilled reporters who can effectively communicate the complexities of ocean issues to a global audience, thereby fostering a deeper public connection to our ocean and inspiring collective efforts to protect it.

Suggested ocean topics to cover

- Climate change impacts on the ocean, including sea-level rise, ocean acidification, and warming waters.
- The role of the ocean in global carbon capture and its implications for climate mitigation strategies.
- Human rights issues related to ocean governance, particularly affecting coastal and Indigenous communities. Economic aspects of the ocean, including sustainable fishing, tourism, shipping, and the blue economy.
- Success stories and innovative solutions in marine conservation and sustainable practices.

Voices to hear

- Local and Indigenous communities with traditional knowledge and firsthand experience of ocean changes. Scientists and researchers specializing in marine biology, climate science, and oceanography.
- Environmental activists and NGOs working on the front lines of ocean conservation.
- Policymakers and government officials responsible for creating and implementing marine policies.
- Representatives from industries that rely on or impact the ocean, such as fishing, shipping, and tourism.

Regions to cover

- Underrepresented and vulnerable regions such as SIDS, West and East Africa, Southeast Asia, and the Pacific Islands.
- Areas where significant developments in conservation are taking place, or where the effects of overexploitation are most pronounced.
- Coastal regions where local economies and cultures are deeply intertwined with the health of the ocean.

Building reporting capacity

- Provide specialized training to journalists on ocean literacy, scientific research methods, and investigative techniques.
- Offer workshops on using satellite imagery, tracking ships, and understanding trade information and territorial conflicts. Encourage mentorship programs pairing seasoned environmental reporters with Fellows to share knowledge and best practices.
- Facilitate access to scientific experts and databases to ensure accurate and up-to-date information.
- Facilitate access to imagery (videos, photos, infographics) that can help carry the tone of the narratives and bring audiences closer.

Partnerships to seek

- Collaborate with academic institutions and research organizations to gain access to the latest studies and expert insights.
- Partner with local media outlets in targeted regions to amplify local voices and perspectives.
- Engage with international bodies like the United Nations and other intergovernmental organizations involved in ocean governance.
- Work with environmental NGOs to understand ongoing initiatives and campaigns that could be highlighted through reporting.
- Connect with technology companies and data providers that can offer tools and platforms for advanced reporting capabilities.

Limitations to keep in mind

Although efforts were made to interview a variety of profiles and to add further exploratory sources to inform the analysis, this study may not fully encompass the breadth of challenges faced by journalists in different regions or contexts. Questions of personal safety or governmental censorship, for example, were not covered when discussing investigative work, despite a few experts indicating these are very real issues for the work of reporters.

A multitude of ocean-related issues and their consequences to the environment and human lives were discussed with the interviewed experts, and the ones mentioned in this report are by no means exhaustive. Experts were asked to discuss points they found more pressing and provide examples, but given unlimited time and resources, many other topics that require attention would have surfaced within deeper discussions. Some examples are the need for a stronger ocean governance structure and marine spatial planning that can establish guidelines on how to tackle challenges at varying levels, the impact of agriculture in creating dead zones where most marine life cannot survive, marine disease outbreaks and other effects of ocean warming and how it changes entire ecosystems, ocean grabbing by corporations and governments and its consequences for local communities, migration caused by natural disasters, and so on. As observed in the study, the guidance of local specialists in each region will be the best compass to build an agenda of topics that need addressing first.



Making Waves

Reflecting the current state of
ocean reporting and exploring
opportunities for better storytelling



**Scan to explore
ocean stories**