

**Marine Health as a Natural Right: Implementing Integrated
Environmental Governance to Curb Pollution**

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Marine Health as a Natural Right?: Implementing Integrated Environmental Governance to Curb Pollution

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Abstract

This paper critically discusses how marine health can be protected by curbing pollution. The paper observes that marine pollution is a major global environmental challenge with severe impacts on people and planet. It examines the causes and effects of marine pollution. In light of its adverse impacts, the paper posits that curbing marine pollution is key towards protecting marine health as a natural right for people and planet. The paper discusses how integrated environmental governance can be implemented towards curbing marine pollution for Sustainable Development.

1.0 Introduction

Marine health is vital for human and planetary well-being. It has been observed that oceans and seas, which cover nearly 70 percent of the planet's surface, provide humanity and nature with numerous benefits¹. According to the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP), the ocean sustains life on Earth due to the numerous ecosystem, economic and social services it provides². For example, it is estimated that oceans produce nearly half of the planet's oxygen³. It has been pointed out that the majority of the oxygen produced from oceans is from oceanic plankton — drifting plants, algae, and some bacteria that can photosynthesize⁴. It has been observed that these organisms use carbon dioxide, water and energy from the sun to make food for themselves, releasing oxygen in the process⁵. By producing most of the planet's oxygen, oceans play an important role in sustaining life on Earth.

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¹ European Commission., 'EU Action Plan: Protecting and Restoring Marine Ecosystems for Sustainable and Resilient Fisheries' Available at <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/HTML/?uri=CELEX%3A52023DC0102> (Accessed on 17/04/2026)

² United Nations Environment Programme., 'Biodiversity and Ecosystems' Available at <https://www.unep.org/topics/ocean-seas-and-coasts/regional-seas-programme/biodiversity-and-ecosystems#:~:text=UNEP's%20Regional%20Seas%20Programme%20plays,global%20and%20regional%20marine%20ecosystems> (Accessed on 17/04/2026)

³ United Nations., 'World Oceans Day' Available at <https://www.un.org/en/observances/oceans-day> (Accessed on 17/04/2026)

⁴ How much oxygen comes from the ocean?., Available at <https://oceanservice.noaa.gov/facts/ocean-oxygen.html#:~:text=It's%20important%20to%20remember%20that,use%20oxygen%20for%20cellular%20respiration>. (Accessed on 17/04/2026)

⁵ Morsink. K., 'With Every Breath You Take, Thank the Ocean' Available at <https://ocean.si.edu/ocean-life/plankton/every-breath-you-take-thank-ocean> (Accessed on 17/04/2026)

In addition, it is estimated that the ocean constitutes over 90 per cent of the habitable space on the planet and contains nearly 250,000 known species, with many more remaining to be discovered⁶. The ocean is therefore a biodiversity hotspot. Marine biodiversity supports billions of people all over the world by providing food, coastal protection, and economic opportunities⁷. The ocean has also been identified as the world's most potent tool towards confronting climate change⁸. According to the United Nations, the world's oceans are central to reducing global greenhouse gas emissions and stabilizing the Earth's climate⁹. It is estimated that oceans absorb nearly 30 per cent of all carbon dioxide emissions while also capturing an estimated 90 per cent of the excess heat generated by these emissions¹⁰. The ocean hosts blue carbon ecosystems including mangroves, saltmarshes and seagrasses which have the ability to absorb and store more carbon than tropical forests¹¹. It has been observed that marine ecosystems including mangroves, seagrass beds, and coral reefs act as natural shields, guarding coastal communities and their property from adverse climatic events such as sea level rises, storm surges, and erosion¹².

The ocean has also been described as a backbone of the global economy¹³. It is estimated that nearly 600 million livelihoods and 100 million jobs, the vast majority of them in developing countries, depend on ocean-based sectors including fisheries, aquaculture and tourism¹⁴. In addition, it is estimated that nearly 90 percent of globally traded goods are carried by oceans and seas making them an indispensable resource in global commerce¹⁵.

Healthy oceans and seas are therefore vital for people and planet. The ocean provides numerous benefits for both people and planet including climate regulation, food security, biodiversity conservation, coastal protection and economic growth¹⁶. However, challenges such as overexploitation of resources, habitat destruction, unsustainable coastal development, pollution and climate change are devastating oceans and

⁶ United Nations., 'Marine Biodiversity and Ecosystems Underpin a Healthy Planet and Social Well-Being' Available at <https://www.un.org/en/chronicle/article/marine-biodiversity-and-ecosystems-underpin-healthy-planet-and-social-well-being> (Accessed on 17/04/2026)

⁷ United Nations Environment Programme., 'Biodiversity and Ecosystems' Op Cit

⁸ United Nations., 'The ocean - the world's greatest ally against climate change' Available at <https://www.un.org/en/climatechange/science/climate-issues/ocean#:~:text=The%20ocean%20generates%2050%20percent,the%20impacts%20of%20climate%20change.> (Accessed on 17/04/2026)

⁹ Ibid

¹⁰ Ibid

¹¹ Wood. K., Ashford. O., 'How Blue Carbon Can Tackle the Climate, Biodiversity and Development Crises' Available at <https://www.wri.org/insights/what-is-blue-carbon-benefits-for-people-planet> (Accessed on 17/04/2026)

¹² The Ocean and Climate Change: A Story of Evolution and Urgency., Available at <https://www.agnesafrika.org/the-ocean-and-climate-change/#:~:text=Ocean%20Adaptation%20in%20Focus,surges%20while%20soaking%20up%20carbon> (Accessed on 17/04/2026)

¹³ United Nations Trade and Development., 'Ocean for sustainable development: What needs to happen next' Available at <https://unctad.org/news/ocean-sustainable-development-what-needs-happen-next> (Accessed on 17/04/2026)

¹⁴ Ibid

¹⁵ Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development., 'Ocean Economy and Innovation.' Available at <https://www.oecd.org/ocean/topics/ocean-economy/> (Accessed on 17/04/2026)

¹⁶ United Nations., 'World Oceans Day' Op Cit

seas with severe impacts on both people and planet¹⁷. Consequently, nurturing marine health is necessary towards Sustainable Development.

This paper critically discusses how marine health can be protected by curbing pollution. The paper observes that marine pollution is a major global environmental challenge with severe impacts on people and planet. It examines the causes and effects of marine pollution. In light of its adverse impacts, the paper posits that curbing marine pollution is key towards protecting marine health as a natural right for people and planet. The paper discusses how integrated environmental governance can be implemented towards curbing marine pollution for Sustainable Development.

2.0 Marine Pollution: Causes and Effects

According to UNEP, pollution is a major threat to the health of the world's oceans¹⁸. It has been observed that marine pollution, originating from both land and sea, poses one of the greatest threats to the health of the world's oceans with severe consequences on both people and planet¹⁹. Marine pollution takes various forms including plastic pollution, agricultural runoff, industrial and municipal waste, marine litter, and oil spills²⁰. It has been observed that land-based sources including agricultural runoff, plastic waste and industrial discharges account for nearly 80 percent of marine pollution²¹.

In particular, marine plastic pollution is a major global environmental crisis. It has been observed that plastic pollution and marine litter have emerged as pressing environmental challenges of our time, impacting the health of our ocean and its ecosystems²². Every day, plastic leaks into the ocean from thousands of sources all over the world²³. It is estimated that every year, 11 million metric tons of plastics enter into the world's oceans on top of the estimated 200 million metric tons that currently circulate in marine environments²⁴.

Marine plastic pollution undermines the health of both people and planet. For example, it has been observed that marine species often ingest or are entangled by plastic debris leading to severe injuries and

¹⁷ United Nations Environment Programme., 'Biodiversity and Ecosystems' Op Cit

¹⁸ United Nations Environment Programme., 'Ocean, Seas and Coasts' Available at <https://www.unep.org/topics/ocean-seas-and-coasts> (Accessed on 17/04/2026)

¹⁹ United Nations Environment Programme., 'Marine and Land-based Pollution' Available at <https://www.unep.org/topics/ocean-seas-and-coasts/regional-seas-programme/marine-and-land-based-pollution#:~:text=Marine%20pollution%2C%20originating%20from%20both,international%20cooperation%20for%20cleaner%20oceans.> (Accessed on 17/04/2026)

²⁰ Ibid

²¹ Ibid

²² United Nations Environment Programme., 'Plastic Pollution & Marine Litter' Available at [https://www.unep.org/topics/ocean-seas-and-coasts/ecosystem-degradation-pollution/plastic-pollution-marine-litter#:~:text=Every%20year%2C%2019%2D23%20million%20tonnes%20of%20plastic,1950%20and%202017%20became%20plastic%20waste%20\(UNEP\)](https://www.unep.org/topics/ocean-seas-and-coasts/ecosystem-degradation-pollution/plastic-pollution-marine-litter#:~:text=Every%20year%2C%2019%2D23%20million%20tonnes%20of%20plastic,1950%20and%202017%20became%20plastic%20waste%20(UNEP)) (Accessed on 17/04/2026)

²³ Ocean Plastic Pollution Explained., Available at <https://theoceancleanup.com/ocean-plastic-pollution-explained/> (Accessed on 17/04/2026)

²⁴ Ocean Conservancy., 'Fighting for Trash Free Seas' Available at <https://oceanconservancy.org/trash-free-seas/plastics-in-the-ocean/> (Accessed on 17/04/2026)

death²⁵. Marine biodiversity including sea birds, turtles and fish have been found with plastic in their guts²⁶. It has been pointed out that plastic pollution puts marine species at higher risk of ingesting plastic, suffocating, or becoming entangled in plastic waste²⁷. Further, plastic pollution damages critical marine ecosystems and habitats including mangroves, salt marshes and coral reefs impeding essential biological processes thus undermining planetary health²⁸. Marine plastic pollution is therefore a major challenge since it harms marine life, impacts human health, and results in economic costs arising from cost of cleaning up plastic waste, lost tourism revenue, and damage to fisheries and marine ecosystems²⁹.

In addition to land-based sources of pollution such as plastic waste, ocean-based sources of pollution including oil spills, ocean dumping, and emissions from shipping activities are a major threat to marine health³⁰. In particular, it has been observed that oil spills take a huge toll on marine biodiversity leading to death of marine life while also devastating key habitats including mangroves and coral reefs³¹. Oil spills also result in economic costs related to clean-up and lost revenue from tourism as a result of polluted marine environments including beaches and shorelines³².

Marine pollution is therefore a major threat to people and planet since it contaminates coastal ecosystems, harms marine life, and threatens human health and livelihoods, particularly for vulnerable coastal communities³³. Consequently, it is imperative to curb marine pollution towards nurturing healthy oceans and seas for people and planet.

3.0 Implementing Integrated Environmental Governance to Curb Marine Pollution

Marine pollution is a major threat to the health of our oceans and seas. It has been observed that marine pollution poses environmental, economic, health, aesthetic and cultural threats, including degradation of marine and coastal habitats and ecosystems, harm to marine life and health impacts on vulnerable coastal communities³⁴. In addition, marine pollution fuels socio-economic losses in marine-based sectors including

²⁵ International Union for Conservation of Nature., 'Marine Plastic Pollution' Available at https://iucn.org/sites/default/files/2024-04/marine-plastic-pollution-issues-brief_nov21-april-2024-small-update_0.pdf (Accessed on 17/04/2026)

²⁶ United Nations Environment Programme., 'Clean Seas Campaign Promotes the Right to a Healthy Environment, Including Plastic-Free Oceans' Available at <https://www.unep.org/news-and-stories/story/clean-seas-campaign-promotes-right-healthy-environment-including-plastic> (Accessed on 17/04/2026)

²⁷ United States Environmental Protection Agency., 'Impacts of Plastic Pollution' Available at <https://www.epa.gov/plastics/impacts-plastic-pollution> (Accessed on 17/04/2026)

²⁸ Ibid

²⁹ 'The Rising Tide of Plastic Pollution' Available at <https://www.green.earth/plastic-pollution> (Accessed on 17/04/2026)

³⁰ United Nations Environment Programme., 'Marine and Land-based Pollution' Op Cit

³¹ United Nations Environment Programme., 'How to manage the damage from oil spills' Available at <https://www.unep.org/news-and-stories/story/how-manage-damage-oil-spills> (Accessed on 17/04/2026)

³² Ibid

³³ United Nations Environment Programme., 'Marine and Land-based Pollution' Op Cit

³⁴ United Nations Environment Programme., 'Marine Pollution Prevention, Reduction and Control' Available at <https://www.unep.org/cobsea/what-we-do/marine-pollution-prevention-reduction-and-control> (Accessed on 17/04/2026)

fisheries and tourism³⁵. Curbing pollution is therefore key towards nurturing marine health as a natural right for people and planet.

Sound environmental governance is key towards protecting the health of the ocean for posterity. According to UNEP, strengthening environmental governance is key towards protecting marine biodiversity, maintaining ecological balance in marine environments, and supporting the economies and livelihoods of communities worldwide, especially in regions dependent on marine resources³⁶. Through robust environmental governance approaches, it is possible to protect important marine habitats including mangroves and coral reefs, and sustainably manage human activities such as fishing, shipping and tourism in order to curb their impacts on marine environments³⁷.

In particular, it has been observed that implementing integrated environmental governance approaches is key towards safeguarding marine health³⁸. Integrated environmental governance is an approach that involves promoting a sectoral and cross-sectoral balance between social development, sustained economic growth and the sustainable management of natural resources and ecosystems³⁹. It has been observed that through integrated environmental governance, it is possible to foster a coordinated decision making on the environment and accelerate progress towards the Sustainable Development agenda⁴⁰. Integrated environmental governance involves collaboration at the global, regional, national and local levels, sectoral and cross-sectoral partnerships, and the engagement of all stakeholders including women, youth and indigenous peoples and local communities, including through their participation in environmental decision-making⁴¹.

Integrated environmental governance is an effective approach towards curbing pollution towards marine health as a natural right. For example, it has been observed that marine pollution is a transboundary challenge that requires global and regional cooperation towards tackling its causes and effects⁴². Consequently, integrated environmental governance can enable the global community to work together towards curbing marine pollution for people and planet⁴³. In order to achieve this goal, there have been calls to adopt a binding international treaty on plastic pollution in order to stimulate global action, investments, innovation and partnerships towards tackling this environmental problem⁴⁴. It has been

³⁵ Ibid

³⁶ United Nations Environment Programme., 'Biodiversity and Ecosystems' Op Cit

³⁷ Ibid

³⁸ United Nations Trade and Development., 'Ocean for sustainable development: What needs to happen next' Op Cit

³⁹ United Nations Environment Programme., 'Integrated Approach to Environmental Sustainability in Development Planning' Available at <https://www.unep.org/regions/latin-america-and-caribbean/regional-initiatives/strengthening-environmental-governance-1> (Accessed on 17/04/2026)

⁴⁰ United Nations Environment Programme., 'Integrate Environmental Sustainability into the Sustainable Development Goals' Available at <https://www.unep.org/explore-topics/environmental-rights-and-governance/what-we-do/supporting-2030-agenda/integrate> (Accessed on 17/04/2026)

⁴¹ Ibid

⁴² United Nations Environment Programme., 'Marine Pollution Prevention, Reduction and Control' Op Cit

⁴³ Ibid

⁴⁴ Ellen Macarthur Foundation., 'A Circular Economy for Plastic' Available at <https://www.ellenmacarthurfoundation.org/topics/plastics/overview#:~:text=A%20circular%20econo>

observed that a legally-binding treaty based on global rules and comprehensive circular economy measures represents a unique opportunity to accelerate change at all levels and end plastic pollution and its impacts⁴⁵. In addition, it has been observed that adopting and implementing the *Agreement under the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea on the Conservation and Sustainable Use of Marine Biological Diversity of Areas beyond National Jurisdiction (BBNJ Agreement)*⁴⁶ provides a unique opportunity to strengthen environmental governance through integrated approaches towards tackling pollution among other threats to marine biodiversity and ecosystems in Areas Beyond National Jurisdiction (ABNJ). The BBNJ Agreement provides a framework that can enable the global community in an integrated, coherent and cooperative manner, to address biodiversity loss and degradation of ecosystems in ABNJ, due, in particular, to climate change impacts on marine ecosystems, such as warming and ocean deoxygenation, as well as ocean acidification, pollution, including plastic pollution, and unsustainable use of marine biodiversity and resources⁴⁷. It is therefore imperative for all countries to adopt and implement the BBNJ Agreement towards fostering an integrated approach in protecting marine biodiversity in ABNJ from pollution among other threats.

In addition to fostering international and regional collaboration and cooperation, integrated environmental governance ensures the participation of all stakeholders including coastal communities in conservation efforts towards effectively nurturing marine health. For example, involving coastal communities is key towards strengthening ocean cleanup activities, promoting sustainable ocean management practices and restoring coastal ecosystems impacted by pollution including mangroves and coral reefs⁴⁸. It is therefore necessary to implement integrated environmental governance in order to strengthen global, regional, national and local efforts to curb pollution and safeguard marine health as a natural right.

4.0 Conclusion

With the health of the world's oceans and seas being jeopardized by pollution among other threats, integrated environmental governance provides an effective approach towards nurturing marine health as a natural right for people and planet. It is therefore imperative to implement integrated environmental governance in order to foster global and regional collaboration towards tackling the transboundary nature of pollution⁴⁹. Adopting a global treaty on plastic pollution and implementing the BBNJ Agreement provides effective pathways towards fostering integrated approaches in tackling marine pollution. In addition, involving all stakeholders including local coastal communities is vital in harnessing integrated solutions towards effectively curbing pollution and ensuring marine health⁵⁰. Implementing integrated

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e (Accessed on 17/04/2026)

⁴⁵ Ibid

⁴⁶ Agreement under the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea on the Conservation and Sustainable Use of Marine Biological Diversity of Areas beyond National Jurisdiction., New York, 19 June 2023

⁴⁷ Ibid

⁴⁸ United Nations Environment Programme., 'Biodiversity and Ecosystems' Op Cit

⁴⁹ United Nations Environment Programme., 'Marine Pollution Prevention, Reduction and Control' Op Cit

⁵⁰ United Nations Environment Programme., 'Biodiversity and Ecosystems' Op Cit

environmental governance provides an effective route towards curbing pollution and fostering marine health as a natural right for people and planet.

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