

Ocean Champion Statement

Hon. Prime Minister of Tuvalu

Ocean Action Panel 1: Conserving, sustainably managing, and restoring marine and coastal ecosystems including deep-sea ecosystems

Excellencies, Distinguished Delegates, Friends of the Ocean

I speak today on behalf of the Pacific Islands Forum group and bring you warm greetings from the people of Tuvalu — a Pacific small island nation but large ocean State, standing at the frontlines of the climate and ocean crisis.

Our islands may rise barely two meters above sea level, but we along with my Pacific family are custodians of some of the most biodiverse and culturally significant marine ecosystems: such as mangroves, seagrass and coral reefs, including the two deepest ocean trenches on the planet that support globally significant biodiversity including hundreds of endemic species. The ocean is our lifeline, culture, identity and heritage. It is so important that Pacific leaders have committed to responsibly and effectively manage 100% of our Blue Pacific Ocean both within and beyond national jurisdiction. This is why the BBNJ Agreement is all the more important and we should all ratify as soon as possible.

Today, our ocean that has sustained us for generation is under threat.

Climate change impacts, including ocean warming, and sea-level rise as well as ocean acidification, pose existential threats to the livelihoods, security and well-being of Pacific peoples, communities and countries. Plastic wastes, agricultural runoffs and deliberate discharge of harmful substances continues to pollute our marine ecosystems. At the same time, overfishing and illegal, unreported and unregulated fishing continue to deplete our fish stocks, undermining both our fisheries revenue and food security. These threats are not of our making, yet we disproportionately bear their consequences.

We are here not just to talk but to fight for its future and ours. **We must not wait: urgent action is needed to protect and restore those vital ecosystems.** Countries and industries must also deliver concrete reductions in CO₂ and all GHG emissions across all sectors, including methane, to avoid further ocean acidification. Restoring and protecting existing ecosystems from further degradation is critical to preserving the long-term intergenerational benefits of a healthy ocean.

However, we cannot do this alone and are working with partners to preserve and restore our coastal ecosystems, which are vital in protecting our infrastructures, our homes, and our land, as part of a long-term coastal adaptation strategy.

As an example, Tuvalu is partnering with UNEP to implement a GEF project on “Ecosystem-based Adaptation for improved livelihood in Tuvalu”, to restore around 180 hectares of coastal ecosystems to protect our communities against coastal flooding and erosion. Under the new Kiwa initiative EMPOWER project, we are also enhancing the resilience of marine and coastal ecosystems by strengthening community-based management, building on traditional knowledge and fishery management plans developed for each island community.

We recognise that long-term conservation management is vital for sustainable fisheries the ecosystems on which they depend on. The Funafuti Conservation Area established in 1999 under the Conservation Area Act has since served as a home supporting a rich array of marine species and through spillover effects, food security has significantly improved. Niue’s leadership in marine park conservation attracting international support and sustainable investment further demonstrate our region’s concerted effort in preserving our valued ocean.

However, the adverse impacts of climate change continue to undermine our efforts to achieving a sustained and healthy marine ecosystem. Now more than ever, there is a critical need for climate finance to be directed toward ensuring these ecological services and economic benefits we aim to restore and protect are effectively realised for lasting, intergenerational impact.

We need climate finance that reaches the shores of those who need it most.

We need to empower our communities and youth — the stewards of the sea — with the tools, technology, and livelihood opportunities to protect what they have always known to be sacred. This must be built upon the deep traditional conservation knowledge of Indigenous Peoples and local communities that is rooted in generations of lived experience, cultural practice, and connection to the ocean.

Let us be the generation that chooses restoration over ruin, sustainability over short-term gain, and unity over indifference. And let us ensure that the children of the Pacific — and of the world — inherit a thriving ocean, not a memory of one.

I thank you.