

UNEP submission to the 2026 Secretary-General's report on Oceans and the law of the sea on the topic "Marine ecosystem restoration"

9th January 2026

The SIDS Restoration Flagship

The Small Island Developing States (SIDS) Restoration Flagship, established under the UN Decade on Ecosystem Restoration, supports SIDS to restore marine and coastal ecosystems while enabling a just and sustainable transition to a Sustainable Blue Economy (SBE). SIDS face unique challenges including narrow economic bases, high dependence on marine ecosystems, limited institutional capacity, data gaps, and acute exposure to climate change and extreme events. The Flagship is positioning and operationalising restoration as an economic enabler, embedding ridge-to-reef restoration into national SBE pathways, including through ecosystem and natural capital assessments, marine spatial planning, strengthened marine protected area governance, and community-centred sustainable livelihood transitions. Across Comoros, Saint Lucia and Vanuatu, the Flagship is helping translate restoration into policy reform, investment pipelines and cross-sectoral coordination. Upcoming priorities include scaling restoration finance, further advancing and operationalising nature-positive sustainable blue economies, strengthening long-term restoration data and monitoring, and accelerating cross-SIDS learning to inform global best practice on marine ecosystem restoration and SBE transitions.

Key outcomes of the SIDS Restoration Flagship to date:

- **Policy and governance reform:**
 - In Comoros, completion underway of a Sustainable Blue Economy Rapid Readiness Assessment (RRA), Strategic Action Plan and Integrated Policy Framework, directly informing a fully revised National Sustainable Blue Economy Policy, launching Jan 2025.
 - Completion of Comoros first Marine Spatial Planning (MSP) - this for the Coelacanth National Park, supported by a dedicated MSP specialist and aligned through a deeply participatory multi-stakeholder process. The MSP is now actively guiding eco-tourism development, agreed take and no-take zones, and restoration priorities for reefs, seagrasses and mangroves, turning planning into a practical community-owned restoration engine.
- **On-the-ground restoration and co-management:**
 - Community-lead mangrove restoration scaled in Comoros through a signed Letter of Agreement with the Directorate of Environment, aligned with the newly launched Marine Spatial Plan.
 - Community fisheries co-management agreements being expanded, supporting restorative fisheries value chains and livelihoods.
- **National implementation and national coordination unlocked:**
 - In Saint Lucia, the Flagship is actively harmonising delivery with the GEF portfolio, notably the GEF-6 South-East Coast Restoration Project (SECP) and the GEF Blue and

Green Islands Integrated Programme (BGI), through proposed shared governance structures, aligned workplans and consolidated monitoring systems.

- **Capacity building and monitoring systems:**
 - 45 national stakeholders from government, civil society, private sector, youth groups and local communities engaged in multi-stakeholder SBE workshops in Saint Lucia (July 2025).
 - Introduction and applied use of the RRA and the UN Decade's Framework for Ecosystem Restoration Monitoring (FERM), generating an initial evidence base and capacity needs to further strengthen national monitoring, address data gaps and improve coordination across institutions.

- **Nature-positive livelihoods and economic transition:**
 - Launch of the Restoration Factory model in Saint Lucia, with participatory stakeholder mapping completed. 40 local eco-entrepreneurs will be incubated and trained towards expediting national nature-positive value chains, in collaboration with Export Saint Lucia.
 - In Vanuatu, a new National Coordinator has been recruited, with priority actions advancing on ecotourism, mangrove and forest restoration in collaboration with Forestry and Tourism departments. \$250 000 of co-financing leveraged for the establishment of sea-cucumber farming which will directly support alternative livelihoods and the conservation of seagrass habitats.
 - Early pathways established to link restoration outcomes with sustainable tourism, fisheries and coastal enterprise development.

- **Cross-SIDS learning and replication:**
 - The Flagship is functioning as a living laboratory across three SIDS regions, generating transferable tools, governance models and investment pipelines.

UNEP Marine and Coastal Small Grants Programme

Through its Small Grants Programme focused on marine and coastal ecosystems, UNEP, supported by Monaco, has advanced innovative restoration initiatives that strengthen coral reef and mangrove ecosystems while contributing to the Kunming-Montreal Global Biodiversity Framework and the UN Decade on Ecosystem Restoration.

1. In Benin's Mono Delta Biosphere Reserve, UNEP partnered with IUCN National Committee of the Netherlands and Eco-Benin (a national NGO) to restore mangroves, diversify livelihoods, and prepare for blue carbon certification. A total of 3,600 meters of canals were dug to restore mangroves through re-establishing the natural hydrology, 5 hectares of mangroves were planted near Lake Ahémé, and 30 hectares were designated as sacred forests through traditional Zangbéto rituals in five villages. Eco-Benin trained two communities in hydrology-based restoration techniques, established nurseries cultivating *Rhizophora racemosa* and *Avicennia germinans*, and improved seedling survival rates from 60% to 100%. These efforts have restored ecological functions, reinforced cultural stewardship, and laid the groundwork for accreditation of blue carbon credits across an estimated 1,700 hectares of mangroves with restoration potential.

2. In the Caribbean, UNEP and The Nature Conservancy (TNC) supported coral restoration by linking conservation with the tourism sector and building on the 2021 “Guide to Coral Reef Restoration for the Tourism Sector”, which remains a cornerstone resource for operators. The project created an online Knowledge Centre hosted on the Caribbean Alliance for Sustainable Tourism platform, compiling manuals, reports, guidelines, and webinars tailored to the tourism sector. Policy framework analyses were conducted in three countries (Jamaica, the Dominican Republic, and the Bahamas) to identify regulatory obstacles and enabling conditions, with attention to women and marginalized groups. Two interactive regional webinars were held in 2025, and the Caribbean Coral Reef Tourism Stewardship Award recognized three exemplary tourism operators active in coral restoration, with lessons compiled into a Best Practices Brief.

3. In the Pacific, UNEP partnered with Corals for Conservation (C4C) to support coral reef restoration through the creation of heat-adapted coral nurseries. The project implemented the “Reefs of Hope” methodology, establishing 10 coral gene bank nurseries across Fiji housing 2,500 heat-adapted coral genotypes, including six nurseries within locally managed marine areas. In Samoa, nurseries were built at two marine sites, with multiple structures (A-frames, ropes, spider frames, star frames) and temperature loggers installed to track heat stress. Community participation was central, with students and local teams engaged in coral planting and monitoring.

Go Blue Project in Kenya

- **Policy and governance reform:**

àIn Kenya, UNEP through the Go Blue project has supported the six coastal counties and the national government in the development of a Sustainable Blue Economy Rapid Readiness Assessment in efforts to advance the blue economy agenda in the country.

Further the UNEP supported the integration of land-sea planning through the development and piloting on integrated land-sea planning guidelines with Lamu County.

At a national level, UNEP supported the integration of county level planning to the national planning process by supporting the national Marine Spatial Planning process -UNEP supported the development of a stakeholder engagement strategy and data integration, access and knowledge sharing.

àUNEP further influenced policy related to blue carbon – with the Lamu mangrove blue carbon under the Go Blue project streamlined to the new carbon policies within the country.

- **On-the-ground restoration and co-management:**

àUNEP supported Kenya (in Lamu) with the development of a 4900 hectares blue carbon project – expected to protect, conserve and restore mangrove forests through the sale of carbon credits. Restoration will be carried out in 116 ha of severely degraded mangrove areas within the blue carbon project area. Areas experiencing low to moderate degradation (~4,492 and 176 ha, respectively) are to be conserved and protected through strengthening community monitoring and surveillance of the mangrove forests.

- **Nature-positive livelihoods and economic transition:**

UNEP is further supporting local communities within the six coastal counties in Kenya promoting nature-based enterprise/ income generating activities including establishment of payment for

ecosystem services enterprises, ecotourism and recreational centres, beekeeping, and sustainable aquaculture. Funds generated from these sustainable businesses are to also benefit conservation and restoration of coastal and marine ecosystems such as mangroves -through restoration efforts.

- **Capacity building and monitoring systems:**

The Go Blue project supported the coastal counties of Kenya with GIS data centres (software and hardware) to strengthen data collection and management for informed decision-making and sustainable management of resources. Government officials were also trained on data collection and analysis (cumulative impact assessment) methods to facilitate monitoring and integration in planning.

UN Decade on Ecosystem Restoration

1. Northern Mozambique Channel

Comoros, Madagascar, Mozambique, and Tanzania make up one of the most biodiverse maritime zones of the Western Indian Ocean that this flagship covers. 35% of the coral reefs in the Indian Ocean are in this zone, and millions rely on it for fishing and coastal livelihoods. Starting with 87,200 hectares under restoration, the plan aims to recover 4.85 million hectares by 2030. Mangroves, coral reefs, and seagrass beds are being restored, fisheries management is being improved, and green and blue corridors are being established to further connect these ecosystems. Climate resilience and community-led conservation strategies are also included in the program. There are various anticipated advantages that are being targeted such as a 30% rise in household income, the development of more than 2,000 employment, and enhanced carbon storage (Madagascar's mangroves already store 300 million tons of Carbon Dioxide).

2. Mexico's Seabird Islands

This initiative spanned more than 60 Mexican islands and are crucial habitats for seabirds and other marine animals. Animals such as rats, cats, and other invasive species ruined the seabird colonies and once there was a huge ecological imbalance there. The flagship, which has recovered 85% of the lost seabird colonies, plans to restore 100,000 hectares of island ecosystems. Restoration activities are comprised of removing invasive species, habitat restoration, and the reestablishment of seabird populations important for the cycling of nutrients in neighbouring marine ecosystems. Besides protecting over 300 traditional species, to make the projects more ecotourism based and sustainable fisheries and engaging local communities sustainable and economically in the long haul.

3. Mar Menor Lagoon (Spain)

The largest saltwater lagoon in Europe, Mar Menor, has for a long-time experienced loss of habitat, agricultural runoff and pollution. This flagship project puts in place a new legal regime which grants the lagoon rights as a living thing, which means that there will be stronger protection measures in place. The measures consist of a 10-point restoration plan to improve water quality and biodiversity, establishing wetlands that can filter agricultural runoff and pollutant removal. As part of the larger plan, the project aims that by 2030 they would restore 8770 hectares across the country. By 2040 the greenbelt is aimed to absorb 82,256 tonnes of carbon dioxide. The main drive of this is aimed at climate adaptation to limit future environmental degradation, sustainable agricultural strategies and community development.