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INTERGOVERNMENTAL OCEANOGRAPHIC COMMISSION
(of UNESCO)

Fifty-seventh Session of the Executive Council
UNESCO, Paris, 25–28 June 2024

Item 3.1 of the Provisional Agenda

**CONSULTATION PROCESS – IOC AND THE FUTURE OF THE OCEAN:
SUSTAINABLE DELIVERY AND EXPANSION OF IOC ACTIVITIES**

Summary

This document is prepared in response to IOC Decision A-32/5 that invited the IOC Executive Secretary to initiate the consultation involving Member States and appropriate stakeholders.

It presents the IOC Executive Secretary's analysis of the context and the scope of the consultation as defined by the IOC Assembly and proposes a framework and timeline for the Executive Council's review.

The proposed decision is referenced as EC-57/Dec.3.1 in the Action Paper for the session (document IOC/EC-57/AP Draft).

Introduction

1. At its 32nd session (21–30 June 2023), the IOC Assembly discussed the long-term sustainability and expansion of the IOC in view of the fast-evolving developments in ocean science and action. The Assembly called for a consultation on:

how IOC could on the basis of its purpose as defined in its Statutes optimally facilitate activities of Member States and other stakeholders in science-based sustainable ocean planning, ocean science support to implementation of UN environmental conventions and frameworks, and development of a sustainable ocean economy (IOC Decision A-32/5).

2. The IOC Executive Secretary was requested to prepare and initiate the consultation involving Member States via circular letter and appropriate stakeholders and present a progress update to the IOC Executive Council in 2024.

3. It has been important to distinguish this consultation from the consultation undertaken in the framework of the IOC-wide Strategy on Sustainable Ocean Planning and Management (through IOC Circular Letter [2968](#)). Hence it was determined that time and space be put between the two. Due to the change of Executive Secretary effective only 1 March 2024, and the focus in March-April 2024 on successfully preparing and implementing the 2024 Ocean Decade conference in Barcelona, the consultation process has not yet been initiated by way of circular letter.

4. This paper invites the Executive Council to consider and provide guidance on the proposed framework and timeline for the consultation.

The Big Picture

5. The starting point for the Assembly decision was the Commission's purpose defined in Article 2.2 of the IOC Statutes:

...to promote international cooperation and to coordinate programmes in research, services and capacity-building, in order to learn more about the nature and resources of the ocean and coastal areas, and to apply that knowledge to the improvement of management, sustainable development, the protection of the marine environment, and the decision-making process of its Member States.

6. Since its establishment, the IOC has acted largely as a network for international cooperation in ocean research and services, with strong delivery on the first half of its statutory purpose. There are still significant knowledge gaps to be filled, both in terms of knowledge we have never had and in terms of new knowledge needs arising from the rapid changes to ocean ecosystems.

7. At the same time, those rapid changes amount to a loud call for more systematic, targeted and rapid application of knowledge to decision-making processes in the public and private sector as well as multilateral processes.

8. During the lifespan of the IOC, we have seen dramatically accelerated human impacts on the ocean, at times referred to as the *blue acceleration*.¹ Over the past decade, there has been increasing recognition and awareness of the importance of the ocean for national and global economies as well as for planetary processes. We have seen this expressed in SDG 14 and UN Ocean Conferences and emphasized through the establishment of the UN Decade of Ocean Science for Sustainable Development. At the level of national action, the High-Level Ocean Panel's² 18

¹ [The Blue Acceleration: The Trajectory of Human Expansion into the Ocean \(sciencedirectassets.com\)](#)

² [The High Level Panel for a Sustainable Ocean Economy \(Ocean Panel\)](#)

Heads of State and Government representing more than half of the world's areas under national jurisdictions, have committed to sustainable ocean planning for these areas.

9. Several multilateral processes and instruments related to or relevant for the ocean have emerged, such as the Sendai Framework for Disaster Risk Reduction, the formal integration of ocean in the UN Framework for Climate Change, the Global Biodiversity Framework with its requirement of 30% protection and restoration, the WTO agreement on fisheries subsidies, the BBNJ Agreement, and the negotiations on a treaty on plastic pollution.

10. Despite this important progress, knowledge-based action to stop ocean deterioration and restore ocean health is vastly insufficient. One single, telling indicator is the fact that SDG 14 is the least funded of the 17 development goals.³

11. Against this backdrop, Member States have every reason to come together in a profound, systematic reflection process on how they can best act collectively and individually, effectively and swiftly, for the ocean we want based on the knowledge we need. It is hard to envision a better framework for such a reflection process between governments than the IOC, given its statutory purpose; its close, networked and trusted relationship with Member States; and its role as a hub for the Ocean Decade, with its mobilization of a wide group of stakeholders.

12. Member States should take the lead in the consultation. It is therefore appropriate that the Executive Council prepares the framework and timeline for the process with a view to optimizing Member State engagement and broadening the range of national stakeholders involved in IOC activities. Ultimately all key decisions should be made by the entire IOC constituency through the IOC Assembly.

13. Perspectives on 'the big picture' are likely to converge on some matters and diverge on others, and so it is even more important to invite inputs to the consultation framework and harness the collective wisdom of Member State stakeholders. The urgent pressures on the ocean and the growing awareness of the need for stronger ocean action are prompting new initiatives by Member States and multilateral actors alike. It is important for IOC Member States to consider how the effectiveness of various instruments and initiatives can be optimized through concerted efforts, and where the IOC has a comparative advantage in this regard.

Themes, Steps and Timeline

14. IOC Decision A-32/5 calls for the consultation process to define the optimal role of the IOC in support of:

- science-based sustainable ocean planning
- ocean science support to implementation of UN environmental conventions and frameworks
- the development of a sustainable ocean economy

15. This is a wide scope across government, industry and multilateral domains, and with the ambition of engaging wider audiences in Member States, it is reasonable to allow for a three-year process synchronized with the calendar of IOC governing body sessions.

June 2024–June 2025: Needs in knowledge, decision-making and action.

16. The first step is to identify what gaps and needs exist when it comes to facilitating sustainable ocean planning processes in Member States; supporting implementation of relevant UN conventions

³ [World Economic Forum \(weforum.org\)](https://www.weforum.org)

and frameworks; and providing relevant knowledge products to public and private sector actors in developing a sustainable ocean economy.

17. Such a gap assessment will be carried out with Member State institutions, multilateral organizations and the private sector, including by mobilizing networks developed through the Ocean Decade. The assessment will draw on existing research on the state and trajectory of the ocean and its environmental, social and economic impacts. The planned mid-term evaluation of the Ocean Decade (to be conducted in 2024–2025) will also contribute useful information of the effectiveness of the Decade framework to address knowledge gaps and support action.

18. Member States will be encouraged to organize workshops across sectors in their governments, and we will make use of opportunities presented by regional and global gatherings (including of IOC sub-commissions) to hold workshops informing the gap assessment. Conclusions of and reflections based on the gap assessment will be presented to the IOC Assembly in 2025.

June 2025–June 2026: Dialogue on the effectiveness of multilateral ocean frameworks.

19. Based on the gap exercise, the second step should be a structured dialogue among IOC Member States and with relevant multilateral organizations to map capacities and shortcomings in global and regional collaboration with a view to supporting sustainable ocean planning, a sustainable ocean economy and effective implementation of UN environmental conventions and frameworks. The purpose of this dialogue is to prepare a knowledge base which can enable Member States to set priorities and make decisions including on the long-term direction for the IOC.

June 2026–June 2027: IOC and the Future of the Ocean.

20. On the basis of the assessments of gaps and needs, and the mapping of current multilateral frameworks, Member States should determine the long-term direction, priorities and resourcing of the IOC. Conclusions drawn by the Assembly in 2027 will guide the development of the next Mid-Term Strategy to be adopted by the Assembly in 2029.