

Commitment to the Ocean: Our Ocean Conference

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Committing to a sustainable ocean is the direction towards which the world should strive. This article introduces the Our Ocean Conference, an event which is in its 6th year. The event highlights the world's dedication to ocean conservation, sharing of experience, providing opinions, and efforts in taking action.



Group photo at the Our Ocean Conference (2019)

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Introduction

Our Ocean Conference is not an international organization and does not have a secretariat. In spite of this, it receives high participation from ocean communities from all over the world, not to mention its high capabilities in fund raising and execution, and seamless cooperation with industry, government and academia. In the past 6 years, we have seen the focus on and changes to the issues of concern, and in the process, we are able to feel the passion people have for the ocean. How is this achieved?

It all began with the initiative of US Secretary of State John Kerry in 2014. As the Secretary of State, he was very concerned about the ocean and feared its destruction, as there had always been too much talk and too little action. Therefore, he made a call to convene the first conference in Washington D.C., which was attended by representatives from more than 90 countries. There were generous donations from private foundations, such as the Leonardo DiCaprio Foundation, and concerns for global warming

from island leaders like the President of Kiribati were heartwarming. Everyone involved worked together, focusing their attention on topics like sustainable fisheries, ocean acidification, and marine pollution. USD800 million in investment and designation of 3 million square kilometers of marine protected areas were pledged to maintain the ocean environment.

The love for the ocean gradually spread to Valparaíso, Chile in 2015, Washington D.C. in 2016, Malta, EU in 2017, Bali, Indonesia in 2018, and Oslo, Norway in 2019. The 7th conference will be held in Palau in August 2020. Now, let us look at the assets we have accumulated over the past 6 years.

The core and characteristics of the conference

Since the inception of the conference, Secretary of State Kerry has been emphasizing its objectives, which are to "gather experience, share science, provide opinions, and take action." Hence, the conference does not have long speeches discussing principle, but focuses on action. The 3 words used in the conference in Oslo, Norway, are most precise: Learning, Sharing, and Acting.

Different from the format of normal seminars or international conferences, the Our Ocean Conference arranges renowned scholars or high-ranking officials (from presidents and heirs to the throne to department heads) to set the background of the topic for each section of the selected areas of action. It is then followed by seminars where important members of the government, non-governmental organizations, or corporate representatives and CEOs, share their experiences and exchange opinions. During the session, commitments of some countries or organizations (normally limited to 1 minute) are shown. The schedule is compact, encouraging a coherent and logical process.

With such tight schedule, there is no time for discussion during the formal agenda. To grasp the opportunities for exchange, participating representatives conduct peripheral bilateral meetings, and there are also exhibition areas and side meetings for organizations to promote their philosophies to the public.

The highlight of the conference is openness. Hence, you can still find the discussions from the 6 conferences available on the Internet today. The European Union conference also arranged simultaneous interpretation in several languages. In addition, due to the limits of the number of people to go on stage, and the limited time, Norway made special arrangements for people making pledges to pre-record a short video outside the venue, and then upload it, so that they are able to speak freely.

Looking at the arrangement of past conferences, we notice that in order to strike a balance, the host countries invite representatives from industry, government, and academia from various continents, for discussion sessions on the same topic. Besides striking a balance, we can still experience their local cultures, such as Indonesia's tropical atmosphere and Norway's northern marine style.

Civil representatives attending the conference include non-governmental organizations, foundations, or corporations, who play important roles in promotion. Many foundations care about the environment and are willing to commit to large amounts of funding and investment in new ventures. In the Norway conference, Ocean Bottle successfully obtained startup funding because of its young CEO's participation in past conferences. The Norway conference thus arranged several startups to share their new products or ideas, in the aim of gaining recognition and obtaining initial funding from other enterprises.

In the past two years, following the movement associated with the Swedish environmentalist Greta Thunberg, we saw Isabel Wijsen from Indonesia's Bye Bye Plastic Bags, and Norway's Penelope Lea,

appealing to high-ranking officials to take resolute action. The Our Ocean Youth Leadership Summit began after Daniela V. Fernandez attended the conference; funding was obtained from Secretary of State Kerry and corporations to establish the Sustainable Ocean Alliance (<https://www.soalliance.org>). The Youth Leadership Summit has been held since 2016. Outstanding young people are selected from applicants all over the world, and their travel expenses to the conference are covered. The summit invites prominent figures from various domains to share the key works of ocean conservation with these young people. For example, the Norway conference invited the First Lady of Palau to share Palau's experience in ocean conservation and encouraged participants to engage in the discussion. During the conference, Fernandez expressed hopes that the commitments made by the representatives of the conference can be expedited; actions such as deep sea mining, which will damage the ocean, can be stopped, and the various fields can set up scholarships to encourage young leaders in proposing innovative ideas.

Areas of action

There were a total of 9 discussion topics covered in the past conferences, including 4 fixed topics: climate change (topic was ocean acidification in the past few years), sustainable fisheries, marine pollution (with focus on ocean waste plastic) and marine protected areas. Other topics include maritime security and blue economy. The remaining 3 topics, which are attention given to coastal communities, capacity building, and scientific research, were less mentioned or incorporated into other previous topics (as shown in the table).

Sustainable fisheries have always been a focus because fisheries have economic value and are a source of food for millions of people. More than 50 million people, especially in many developing countries, rely on fisheries for a living. As a result, the sustainability of fishery resources faces extremely harsh challenges. The conference focuses on how to reduce overfishing and combat IUU fishing, strengthen regional fishery organizations, value scientific assessment to establish fisheries management policies, fully utilize various tools and suitable disciplinary measures, and implement supervision. In addition, making use of media to raise awareness of ocean conservation is very important, and initiatives by civil societies also aid in establishing a bridge between them.

The core issue of marine pollution is marine debris. Lots of representative mentioned the 8 million tons of plastic rubbish flowing into the ocean every year, and the prediction that the amount of marine debris may exceed that of fish by 2050. The well-known scholar of marine debris research, Dr. Jenna Jambeck, has participated in various discussions at the conference, and has promoted ways of reducing plastic. More and more enterprises have committed to reducing the use of plastic products or increasing the proportion of recycling and reuse.

The topic of climate change began as ocean acidification. In response to the 2019 IPCC5 report, more than 80% of funds from the Norway conference are for improving the situation resulting from climate change, which includes making use of offshore wind farm to reduce GHG emissions and increasing the use of renewable energy.

Marine protected areas are considered important methods in improving the marine environment as well as an important indicator of Goal 14 of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDG14). This includes the marine protected areas of "Papahānaumokuākea Marine National Monument" off the coast of Hawaii announced in the 1st conference in the United States, and the designation of the seas surrounding Easter Island as the world's 3rd largest marine protected area in the 2nd conference held in Chile. The announcement, management, and results of marine protected areas have become the focus of inspection each year.

The newly proposed maritime security and blue economy highlight the importance of the sustainability of the ocean industries.

Table / "Our Ocean Conference" discussion topics

| Year | 2014 | 2015 | 2016 | 2017 | 2018 | 2019 | |
|---|---|---------------------------------|--------------------------------|-------------------------------|------------------------------|-----------------|---|
| Date | 6/16-17 | 10/5-6 | 9/15-16 | 10/5-6 | 10/29-30 | 10/23-24 | |
| Location | Washington D.C., United States | Chile | Washington D.C., United States | Malta, European Union | Bali, Indonesia | Oslo, Norway | |
| Participating countries | >90 | >50 | | | | >100 | |
| Initiatives | | >80 | >136 | 437 | 305 | 374 | |
| Pledged Amount | > USD1.8 billion | >USD2.1 billion | > USD5.24 billion | EURO7.2 billion | USD10.7 billion | USD63.8 billion | |
| Declaration of area of marine protected areas | > 3 million square kilometers | > 1.9 million square kilometers | 4 million square kilometers | 2.5 million square kilometers | 14 million square kilometers | | |
| Topic | 1 Ocean acidification ("climate change" after 2016) | V | V | V | V | V | V |
| | 2 Sustainable fisheries | V | V | V | V | V | V |
| | 3 Marine pollution | V | V | V | V | V | V |
| | 4 Marine protected areas | | V | V | V | V | V |
| | 5 Capacity building | | V | V | | | |
| | 6 Support coastal communities | | V | V | | | |
| | 7 Marine research | | | V | | | |
| | 8 Maritime security | | | V | V | V | V |
| | 9 Blue economy | | | | V | V | V |

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NGO's initiatives and actions

Global NGOs related to ocean affairs, including World Wildlife Fund (WWF), Ocean Conservancy, Global Ghost Gear Initiative (GGGI), and Global Fishing Watch (GFW), make use of this conference to expand their influence and find partners for cooperation. For example, GGGI cooperated with Indonesian communities in promoting real-name fishing gear. The Alliance to End Plastic Waste (AEPW) cooperated with more than 40 companies in promoting waste management. The Monterey Bay Aquarium cooperated with Vietnam and the Philippines in establishing sustainable shrimp industry and blue crab fisheries alliance, among others, which are all success cases of international cooperation. Information transparency is also an initiative of many NGOs. GFW, EJE, and the public sector feel that information transparency (such as the AIS vessel tracking data) will be a useful tool in reducing illegal fisheries, including human rights issues.

Corporate social responsibilities have not been forgotten. Many large corporations have adopted stricter measures in ocean waste issues. For example, Adidas recycles and reuses ocean waste, Nestlé hopes to use 100% recyclable packaging, and IKEA, HP, Coca-Cola, and others have responded with recycling methods. The Marine Stewardship Council (MSC) promotes sustainable products through scientific certification procedures, and has produced fruitful results. It has since accumulated 400 fishery partners, representing 12 million tons, or 16%, of the world's catch. Also, nations such as Japan and China have shown rapid market growth.

Bloomberg Philanthropies has been engaged in this event since the 1st conference initiated by Secretary of State Kerry, and has invested more than USD100 million in protecting corals and fisheries over its 6 years of participation. It has helped to protect 4.25 million square miles of ocean, and participated in GFW in the aim to facilitate 20 countries in joining the network.

Conclusion

The significance of the conference is the cooperation between industry, government, and academia. From the attending representatives, we can see scientific research and actual results provided by scientists and organizations, which can be used as the basis for policymaking. The governments are willing to make management commitments, and together support civil societies, regardless of whether they are industries, social enterprises, or local communities, and to truly achieve the objectives of protecting the ocean through fund investment, technological research, and implementation.

In spite of this, though the conference is not an international organization, it is quite political and Taiwan has relatively limited participation. Taiwan's representatives usually participated as experts or members of civic organizations. For my own part, I participated in the 2nd, 5th, and 6th conferences as a professor of National Taiwan Ocean University, and was able to exchange views with representatives from other countries. As for commitments, during the 2017 conference in Malta, in response to the organizer, the European Union, who concerns about Taiwan's sustainable fisheries management, representative from the Overseas Fisheries Development Council of the Republic of China (OFDC) pledged that "in order to strengthen the management of distant water fisheries, Taiwan is willing to invest USD77.5 million in a 5-year project to fight illegal fisheries, strengthen electronic monitoring and reporting, and implement port state measures." In 2019, under the initiative of the United States, we supported the WTO's commitment to reducing subsidies to IUU fisheries.

However, regardless of participation, the ocean is a common asset of all human beings. What our generation ought to seriously consider is making a serious commitment to the ocean and carrying it out. Lastly, I'd like to quote from the speech of Oceana's advisor, Alexandra Cousteau, during the Norway conference:

"In the decades that have passed, I've watched the place I loved as a child filled with ghosts. Coral reefs have disappeared. Fisheries have shrunk. ...Communities have lost their livelihoods. And ocean conservation and restoration remained underfunded and largely ignored. Our window for creating the change we need rebuild our oceans is shrinking. We are out of time, and so I thank you for your commitments and your ambition here at this conference. My children will be my age by 2050. They are eight and four today. And as the fourth generation of ocean conservation in my family, they might be the generation of my family that write the obituary for the ocean, so I employ you to think of your children with every decision that you make. Think about how your decisions will impact their lives and let them be the ultimate beneficiaries of the work that you do."



Alexandra Cousteau delivering her speech
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