

# High-level meeting of the General Assembly on addressing the existential threats posed by sea level rise, and its follow up process

New York City, USA

## Key messages

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- All stakeholders need to work together to **strengthen global knowledge systems and science–policy interfaces** to guide equitable and effective sea level rise (SLR) responses. States should expand interoperable monitoring systems, integrate ecological, cultural, and socioeconomic data into SLR modelling, and reinforce national science–policy platforms that bring together climate scientists, ocean experts, cultural heritage authorities, Indigenous leaders, and planners.
- Member States should increase financial and technical support to Small Islands Developing States (SIDS) and low-lying developing countries, **ensure community-centred and nature-sensitive adaptation, and significantly expand investment in high-integrity Nature-based Solutions (NbS)**.
- **Cultural heritage—tangible and intangible—must be recognized as highly vulnerable capital and fully integrated into SLR strategies**, with strong protections for the rights and leadership of Indigenous Peoples and local communities.
- States must **uphold and operationalize existing international legal obligations** to protect people and the marine environment. States must therefore integrate human rights obligations into climate decision-making and fulfil their duties under UNCLOS, the BBNJ Agreement, the UNFCCC, the Paris Agreement, human rights law, and customary international law.

## Background

The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) 6<sup>th</sup> Assessment Report and the Special Report on the [Ocean and Cryosphere](#), chapter 4, unequivocally outline the impact that climate change will have on sea level rise. The IPCC warns that “over the next 2000 years, global mean sea level will rise by about 2–3m if warming is limited to 1.5°C and 2–6m if limited to 2°C”. For the period 2081–2100, the IPCC projects global mean sea level to increase by between 0.26 and 0.55 m for a low emission scenario, and between 0.45 and 0.82 m for a high emission scenario. According to the IPCC, “**sea level rise is unavoidable for centuries to millennia due to continuing deep ocean warming and ice sheet melt, and sea levels will remain elevated for thousands of years**”. (IPCC, AR6, SYN, SPM, B.3.)

Sea level rise is one of the major adverse impacts of climate change on the terrestrial and marine environment and human populations and will continue to be so over the coming centuries, including coastal erosion, saltwater intrusion in freshwater aquifers, and terrestrial and marine habitat destruction with adverse effects on ecosystems and species. Rising temperatures also adversely affect vegetation and reef-building species such as corals and mangroves, which protect coastlines from erosion and sea level rise. Other impacts include the de-salination of ocean waters and consequential elevation and re-routing of deep ocean conveyor belt currents, ocean acidification, the intensification and spread of coral reef bleaching, and range changes of marine species.

The relocation of large numbers of people in several coastal and island communities is already occurring and is expected to increase. In addition to sea level rise, coastal communities and habitats are threatened by the related hazards of intensifying tropical storms and storm surges due to climate change.

To address this crisis the President of the 78<sup>th</sup> General Assembly H.E. Mr. Dennis Francis organized an informal plenary on sea level rise in October 2023 and following that a [high-level plenary meeting on addressing the existential threats posed by sea level rise](#) was held during UN High Level week in September 2024. The meeting consisted of a plenary debate and four interactive dialogues on the topics: (i) Knowledge, data and science to inform sea level rise risk assessments and decision-making”; (ii) Adaptation, finance and resilience in relation to sea level rise; (iii) Livelihoods, socioeconomic challenges and culture and heritage in relation to sea level rise; (iv) Sea level rise and its legal dimensions. The Director General of IUCN, Dr Grethel Aguilar, participated in the High-level meeting as an expert panelist, expressing its concern about the implications of sea level rise and other impacts of climate change for people and the planet, noting with alarm the increase in the rate of sea level rise and its multiple impacts as well as the imperative for the international community to take decisive action.

Following the high-level meeting the General Assembly in its decision [78/558](#) mandated a high level meeting in the 81<sup>st</sup> session of the GA with a negotiated outcome. Australia and Cabo Verde have been appointed co-facilitators for the negotiation process, with negotiations due to begin in March 2026.



## Sea Level Rise and current international legal processes

Currently, questions of international law with respect to climate change are being elaborated at the highest juridical level in the UN system.

The International Law Commission, which is a subsidiary body of the UN General Assembly, in 2018 placed the topic of sea level rise in relation to international law on its agenda to examine issues related to the law of the sea, statehood and the protection of persons. In 2025 the Commission adopted its final report and a set of conclusions, including that States are under no obligation to update baselines, geographical coordinates or the outer limits of maritime zones to account for changes as a result of climate change-related sea level rise; the continuity of Statehood; sovereignty and the maintenance of international legal personality and membership of international organizations; and that in spite of the fact that there is no dedicated legal framework to protect persons affected by sea level rise, human rights protections apply and States have a duty to respect, protect and fulfill their human rights obligations with regard to persons affected by sea level rise.

In March 2023, the UN General Assembly requested of the International Court of Justice (ICJ) an advisory opinion on states' obligations in respect of climate change. The ICJ authorized the IUCN as one of 13 international organizations to participate in the proceedings. The IUCN, through the IUCN World Commission on Environmental Law, submitted its [written statement](#) and [written comments](#), as well as [oral statement](#) (*from minute 54:45*).

Two further advisory proceedings on climate change were conducted at the International Tribunal for the Law of the Sea (ITLOS), requested by the Commission on Small Island States on Climate Change and International Law (COSIS), and at the Inter-American Court of Human Rights (IACtHR), requested by Colombia and Chile. The IUCN submitted written statements to both, [ITLOS](#) and the [IACtHR](#) and participated in both oral proceedings.

In the written statement of the IUCN World Commission on Environmental Law to ITLOS, IUCN noted that under the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) States have a duty to protect and preserve the marine environment and that specific obligations with respect to marine pollution require States take all necessary measures and base them on appropriate scientific criteria and international standards. In light of the Paris Agreement, global warming must be limited to 1.5°C by rapid, deep, and immediate GHG emission reductions in all sectors, reaching net-zero emissions by 2050.

In its advisory opinion of 21 May 2024, ITLOS clarified that anthropogenic greenhouse gas emissions are pollution of the marine environment and that UNCLOS States Parties have the obligation to prevent, reduce and control such pollution by taking all necessary measures with stringent due diligence. The Tribunal also discussed sea level rise as an important climate change impact and referred to IPCC statements that it will exacerbate coastal hazards and stress coastal ecosystems that already suffer non-climatic pressures from human activities on ocean and land. It called particular attention to the obligation to protect and preserve rare or fragile ecosystems, and to maintain ecosystem health and the natural balance of the marine environment as well as to the duty to restore degraded ecosystems. The Tribunal found that UNCLOS requires States Parties to take conservation measures for the marine environment, including adaptation and resilience-building.

Furthermore, in its Advisory Opinion on climate change, the ICJ also addressed concerns about sea level rise, particularly its impact on maritime territories and the statehood of small island States. It found that under UNCLOS, State are not required to update their charts or lists of geographical co-ordinates that show the baselines and outer limit lines of their maritime zones because of physical changes resulting from climate-change related sea level rise (para. 362). Thus, existing maritime entitlements can be preserved regardless of sea level rise. ICJ also expressed the view that “once a State is established, the disappearance of one of its constituent elements would not necessarily entail the loss of its statehood” (para. 363). In other words, according to the ICJ, the complete submergence of a territory or the displacement of its population does not affect its legal status as a State.

## IUCN priorities for the High-Level Meeting on Sea Level Rise

### 1. Knowledge, data and science to inform sea level rise and decision-making

IUCN is gravely concerned about the implications of ocean warming, acidification resulting from carbon dioxide emissions, sea level rise and other impacts of climate change on nature and for the billions of people reliant on the ocean for food and livelihoods; We further note with concern, that the accelerating deep ocean warming and melting of polar ice sheets and glaciers will increase sea level rise and other ocean impacts. There is therefore an urgent need for enhanced monitoring networks and modelling to support decision-making to protect vital ecosystems.

More research is needed on how mangroves, reefs, dunes, wetlands, and seagrasses mitigate SLR impacts on communities and cultural heritage. This evidence should inform coastal planning, Nature-based Solutions, and climate finance priorities.

At the High-level meeting member states should therefore commit to:

- a. **Strengthen global and national monitoring systems for sea level rise:** Expand and maintain long-term, interoperable monitoring networks—including tide gauges, satellite altimetry, coastal morphology surveys, and ecosystem health indicators—to ensure accurate and continuous datasets for sea level rise and related ocean changes. Ensure that monitoring systems are accessible, transparent, and integrated into national climate and ocean governance frameworks
- b. **Integrate ecological, cultural, and socioeconomic dimensions into SLR modelling:** Ensure that sea level rise modelling incorporates ecosystem mapping, cultural heritage inventories, Indigenous knowledge, and community vulnerability assessments.
- c. **Expand research on ecosystem roles in mitigating SLR impacts:** Support research on the protective functions of mangroves, coral reefs, dunes, wetlands, and seagrasses in reducing sea level rise impacts on communities, infrastructure, and cultural heritage and use this evidence to inform coastal planning, Nature-based Solutions, and climate finance priorities, including through the Green Climate Fund and other mechanisms.
- d. **Strengthen national science–policy interfaces for coastal resilience:** Establish or reinforce national platforms that bring together climate scientists, ocean experts, cultural heritage authorities, Indigenous leaders, and planners to co-produce knowledge and translate it into policy and regulatory frameworks.



## 2. Adaptation, finance and resilience in relation to sea level rise

SIDS and low-lying developing countries need to be supported to improve climate resiliency efforts and to address common threats such as sea level rise, ocean acidification, pollution, displacement of Indigenous culture, loss of biodiversity, overfishing, and natural disasters. Strategies to protect coastal communities and resources from coastal hazards and sea level rise can have an impact on the ecosystem services on which coastal communities depend, thereby potentially increasing social and economic vulnerability. The design and implementation of sustainable and nature-sensitive strategies aimed to mitigate the impact of sea level rise should include the full and equal participation of coastal communities.

Nature-based Solutions to climate change should be promoted through protected areas and other area-based management tools and conserving and restoring marine ecosystems. This includes the protection, preservation and restoration of coral reefs and blue carbon ecosystems such as mangroves, salt marshes, seagrass beds, and the ocean twilight zone, recognizing their multiple benefits for climate adaptation, mitigation including through carbon sequestration as well as habitat protection

At the High-level meeting member states should commit to:

- a. **Strengthen support for SIDS and low lying developing countries:** Increase financial, technical, and institutional support to SIDS and low lying developing countries to enhance climate resilience and address shared threats, including sea level rise, ocean acidification, pollution, biodiversity loss, overfishing, and climate induced cultural displacement, prioritizing assistance that strengthens local governance, disaster preparedness, and long term adaptation planning.
- b. **Ensure community centred and nature sensitive coastal adaptation:** Design and implement coastal protection strategies that safeguard ecosystem services and avoid increasing social or economic vulnerability and guarantee the full, equal, and effective participation of coastal communities—including Indigenous Peoples and local communities—in the development, implementation, and monitoring of adaptation measures.
- c. **Scale up climate finance for high integrity Nature-based Solutions:** Allocate a significantly greater share of climate finance to high integrity Nature-based Solutions for both adaptation and mitigation and expand direct access financing for Indigenous Peoples and local communities, recognizing their role as custodians of many of the world's most intact ecosystems.
- d. **Integrate NbS into national climate strategies, including through protected areas, other effective area based conservation measures (OECMs), and marine spatial planning:** Protect, preserve, and restore coral reefs and blue carbon ecosystems—such as mangroves, salt marshes, seagrass beds, and the ocean twilight zone—given their essential roles in carbon sequestration, climate adaptation, biodiversity conservation, and coastal protection and adopt and enforce special measures to safeguard fragile marine ecosystems and the habitats of depleted, threatened, or endangered species, in line with international obligations.

### 3. Livelihoods, socioeconomic challenges and cultural heritage in relation to sea level rise

Cultural heritage—tangible and intangible—is a critical dimension of human well-being and identity and must be explicitly recognized in global, regional, and national sea level rise (SLR) agendas as highly vulnerable social, economic, and cultural capital. Sea level rise strategies should adopt a “nature–culture” approach, jointly assessing ecosystems, cultural landscapes, and built heritage, and embedding cultural heritage in coastal zone management, National Adaptation Plans, and NDCs.

States and relevant authorities should identify, map, and monitor cultural heritage at risk from SLR—especially in low-lying coastal zones, small islands, and deltas—and prioritize them in adaptation and disaster risk reduction planning. Policies must respect and protect the cultural heritage, traditional knowledge, and spiritual sites of Indigenous Peoples and local communities, ensuring their full and effective participation, free, prior and informed consent, and leadership in SLR responses.

Regional seas conventions, UNESCO, expert networks, and other multilateral platforms should coordinate efforts to protect transboundary and World Heritage sites threatened by SLR, share best practices, and develop joint adaptation initiatives. Policy responses to SLR must acknowledge that the loss of cultural heritage is irreversible and disproportionately affects those who contributed least to climate change. Protecting heritage today is an obligation to future generations and should guide ambition in mitigation and adaptation.

At the High-level meeting on sea level rise Member States should therefore commit to:

- a. **Recognize cultural heritage as highly vulnerable capital in all SLR agendas and acknowledge the irreversible nature of heritage loss and act with ambition:** Explicitly acknowledge cultural heritage—tangible and intangible—as **highly vulnerable social, economic, and cultural capital** in global, regional, and national sea level rise strategies and ensure that SLR policies reflect the irreplaceable value of cultural heritage for identity, cohesion, and sustainable development, recognizing that the loss of cultural heritage to sea level rise is **irreversible**.
- b. **Adopt a “nature–culture” approach in coastal adaptation:** Integrate ecosystems, cultural landscapes, and built heritage into joint assessments for coastal zone management and embed cultural heritage considerations into **National Adaptation Plans (NAPs), Nationally Determined Contributions (NDCs)**, and other national planning instruments.
- c. **Safeguard the rights, knowledge, and leadership of Indigenous Peoples and local communities:** Ensure that policies respect and protect cultural heritage, traditional knowledge, and spiritual sites of Indigenous Peoples and local communities.
- d. **Strengthen regional and international cooperation for heritage protection:** Use regional seas conventions, UNESCO, expert networks, and other multilateral platforms to coordinate efforts to protect **transboundary and World Heritage sites** threatened by sea level rise.



#### 4. Sea Level Rise and its legal dimensions

IUCN reiterates the urgency of accelerating action in this decade to address the root cause of sea level rise: climate change. This requires transforming the world's energy sector, including through tripling renewable energy capacity globally, transitioning away from fossil fuels in energy systems, in a just, orderly and equitable manner, phasing out fossil fuel subsidies, and accelerating efforts towards global net zero emission energy levels by around mid-century, as agreed to in the 2023 global stocktake decision under the Paris Agreement. According to the ICJ, the adverse effects of climate change, including, through sea level rise, may significantly impair the enjoyment of certain human rights and States must therefore take their obligations under international human rights law into account when implementing their climate change obligations.

Furthermore States have a legal obligation under UNCLOS, the BBNJ Agreement, human rights law and under customary international law to conduct environmental impact assessments, including cumulative impacts on species and ecosystems, regarding the impact of anthropogenic GHG emissions on the oceans. States are required to take all necessary measures to address the adverse impacts of climate change, including sea level rise, the marine environment, including marine living resources. Such measures must embody a precautionary approach as well as an ecosystem approach.

In complying with their duties to protect and preserve the marine environment from the impacts of climate change, States' obligations are further shaped by other norms flowing from general international law. An important obligation, in this regard, is the responsibility to prevent significant environmental damage to the territory of other states or to areas beyond national jurisdiction, such as the high seas. Multilateral agreements, customary international law, the guidance of international judicial bodies, and national laws provide ready tools for cooperation, capacity building and planning that address the cause of and support adaptation to sea level rise.

At the High-level meeting on sea level rise member state should therefore commit to:

- a. **Accelerate system-wide climate action to address the root causes of sea level rise:** Implement the commitments of the 2023 Global Stocktake, including tripling global renewable energy capacity and transitioning away from fossil fuels in energy systems in a just, orderly, and equitable manner.
- b. **Integrate human rights obligations into climate decision-making:** Ensure that climate policies and measures **fully reflect States' obligations under international human rights law**, as affirmed by the International Court of Justice, including the duty to prevent foreseeable harms to the enjoyment of human rights arising from climate impacts such as sea level rise. Strengthen national frameworks to protect the rights of communities—particularly Indigenous Peoples, women, youth, and persons in vulnerable situations—affected by climate-driven coastal change.
- c. **Fulfil legal duties to assess and prevent harm to the marine environment: Conduct environmental impact assessments** that include cumulative impacts on species, ecosystems, and ocean processes, in line with obligations under **UNCLOS**, the **BBNJ Agreement**, human rights law, and **customary international law**.
- d. **Prevent transboundary environmental harm:** Uphold the customary international law obligation to **prevent significant environmental damage** to the territory of other States and to areas beyond national jurisdiction, including the high seas.
- e. **Accelerate implementation of existing multilateral agreements:** Enhance coordination across relevant multilateral environmental agreements—including the Paris Agreement, UNCLOS, CBD, Ramsar Convention, and BBNJ Agreement—to address both the **drivers** and **impacts** of sea level rise.

### Relevant IUCN Resolutions

- [8.039](#) Facilitating synergistic delivery of multilateral commitments on conserving coastal ecosystems
- [7.032](#) Ocean impacts of climate change
- [7.078](#) Conservation, restoration and sustainable management of mangrove ecosystems
- [7.114](#) Integrated solutions to the climate change and biodiversity crises
- [7.013](#) Supporting the Lower Mekong Basin countries with the transboundary management of water resources, ecosystems and biodiversity
- [6.057](#) Take greater account of the ocean in the climate regime
- [6.097](#) Pacific region climate resilience action plan
- [6.107](#) Integration of nature-based solutions into strategies to combat climate change
- [5.168](#) Conserving coastal ecosystems to reduce risks in coastal areas in Africa
- [5.059](#) The importance of adaptation and disaster risk reduction in coastal areas
- [4.129](#) Strengthening the integrated management of coastal areas

### IUCN Publications

- [Ocean and Climate Change - Issue Brief](#)
- [Ocean warming - Issue Brief](#)



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