

Commitment Platforms for Action on Oceans

A Case Study for the Natural Resources Defense Council
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The planet's oceans are under mounting pressure from acidification, pollution, warming, overfishing, and habitat destruction. Almost a half century of treaties, agreements, and negotiations have helped, but it is clear that more action is needed to slow the depletion and degradation of the oceans. In response, a series of non-globally-negotiated commitment platforms have emerged. These platforms engage governments, international organizations, civil society stakeholders, and the private sector to turn commitments into meaningful actions that contribute to global goals on climate and sustainable development. This study examines the successes and struggles of three ocean commitment platforms and makes recommendations to strengthen current and future ones.

Our Ocean Conference (OOC)

In June 2014 Sec. State John Kerry convened the Our Ocean Conference that brought together high level officials, experts, scientists, advocates, and business people from 90 countries to announce new and reaffirmed commitments on three key themes: (1) Sustainable Fisheries; (2) Marine Pollution; and (3) Ocean Acidification. **A total of 31 commitments were announced totaling \$1.8 billion**, including a \$1 billion commitment made by Norway for climate change mitigation and adaptation assistance and a \$460 million commitment by the Global Environment Facility for marine biodiversity. **The US, UK, Bahamas, Palau, and Kiribati pledged to protect over 3 million km², doubling the size of marine protected areas as of 2010.**

Secretary Kerry stressed that the way forward would require us “to think about how we all follow up on this [...] so that we’re really holding each other accountable to this effort going forward.” The U.S. State Dept. published the list of commitments in a press release and has contacted the commitment makers to follow up on progress, however the results of those inquiries have not been made public. The Chilean Foreign Ministry will host the next conference on October 5-6, 2015 and the State Department has been working with the Chileans to include plans to discuss accountability and transparency.

Global Ocean Acidification Observation Network (GOA-ON)

At the UN RIO+20 conference in 2012 scientists from the world's leading ocean chemistry institutions partnered with nations, NGOs, and intergovernmental organizations to announce plans to create the first global network to monitor ocean acidification (OA) with the initial pledge of \$1 million from the U.S. Government. The Network is intended to coordinate efforts to bridge the significant gap in our understanding of OA, its local effects, and to identify important thresholds and tipping points. **Three years later, GOA-ON has grown to 147 members, including governmental, private, and academic institutions.**

Network members are very concerned by the insufficient number of observation sites. **There are less than 150 existing and planned observation sites to survey the world's 361 million sq. km. of ocean surface.** The “Friends of the GOA-ON” fund, announced at the Our Ocean Conference, could become an important source of funding for capacity building in developing countries that would increase the reach of the observational network, but progress towards reaching the initial goal of \$1 million has been slow due to continuing discussions over its grant-making criteria.

The Global Partnership for Oceans (GPO)

The GPO was created to catalyze knowledge and finance in support of projects addressing multiple threats to ocean health. The platform was officially launched in 2012 at the World Oceans Summit by then-World Bank (WB) President Robert Zoellick. He remarked that in order “**to make our oceans healthy and productive again, we need greater cooperative and integrated action around the globe, so that our efforts add up to more than the sum of their parts.**” The GPO quickly grew to include 155 members including UNEP, USAID, The Nature Conservancy, Conservation International, and WWF.

Just months after the GPO was announced, Mr. Zoellick stepped down and the bank began a restructuring period. The creation of a 38-page framework document took over a year to complete and the funding essential for the implementation of GPO projects never materialized. **Ultimately, the GPO never led to any commitments.** In early 2015 the WB withdrew from the GPO in order to focus on its own sustainable fisheries fund. The WB stated that “instead of a singular platform, we now need coalitions of committed actors to take action on our common goals.” The GPO experience is important, because it illustrates the problems of engaging the full range of stakeholders on the full gamut of ocean challenges. Additionally, the departure of Mr. Zoellick left the GPO without the high-level leadership support that is essential for steering such complex platforms.

Key Attributes for Commitment Platforms

We believe that strong ocean commitment platforms could stimulate more action to meet the globally-negotiated goals and targets in numerous treaties and agreements to protect the oceans. Our hope is to learn about the progress and problems of these ocean actions platforms and highlight successful attributes that can be applied to current and future ones. We liken the attributes of strong commitment platforms to those required of any ship at sea:

A Captain – Platforms require high level political support in order to garner interest and commitments from key actors who impact the oceans. When one leader moves on, it is critically important that another step-in to take this role and ensure a continuity of effort.

A Home Port – Platforms must establish portals where commitments can be collected and monitored. A central hub for information about commitments and commitment-makers enables members to check on one another and enables the public to access and assess progress of commitments.

Fuel – Platforms need a reliable source of funding and sufficient staffing to operate effectively. The purpose of these platforms is to turn commitments into meaningful actions, which requires resources. Without sufficient funding these platforms either never leave the dock or are simply adrift at sea.

Make Course Corrections – Platforms must recognize that even the best plans often require deviation once implemented. Rather than tirelessly developing comprehensive processes that ultimately bog them down, platforms need operational frameworks that enable them to adapt to ever-changing threats and circumstances.

A Maximum Load – Bringing too many issues and actors into a single platform can cause it to capsize. Narrowing the scope and recognizing the governance challenges associated with large numbers of stakeholders from a variety of sectors can help assure that a platform can thrive over time.

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