

The ocean in us: Pacific regionalism and identity as a catalyst for global ocean action



Credit: Cameron Diver

by Cameron Diver

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“Pacific peoples are the custodians of the world’s largest, most peaceful and abundant ocean, its many islands and its rich diversity of cultures” – [Framework for Pacific Regionalism](#).

Just over a month ago, I was in Nauru for the annual Pacific Islands Forum Leaders’ Meeting. There is nothing quite like experiencing the reality of a small island/large ocean state to gain a true appreciation of its vulnerability and the remarkable resilience of its people. In the context of today’s climate crisis, the islands of the Pacific are both sustained and threatened by the ocean. Responding to this reality, leaders in Nauru adopted [an expanded definition of human security](#) to include the implications of climate change and environmental degradation. The nexus between climate change and oceans is critical here and ocean science can make a significant contribution to preserving human security from many potential threats such as sea level rise, ocean acidification and warming, salinisation of soils, rarefaction of fisheries or the impact of plastics on marine biodiversity and human health.

The upcoming [United Nations Decade of Ocean Science for Sustainable Development](#) is a golden opportunity to address these challenges and support countries in creating improved conditions for sustainable development. We all need to work together to make the Decade a success – if all we do is develop broad, high-level frameworks, we will fail to save our ocean. We will fail the peoples, such as those in the Pacific islands, who are the cultural and spiritual custodians of our planet’s vast ocean space, its invaluable ecosystems and resources. We cannot afford to fail.

The Framework for Pacific Regionalism has placed the ocean at the heart of its ambition for sustainable development. Today, this vision is expressed through the “blue Pacific” as a vector for the countries of Oceania to harness the potential of their shared stewardship of the Pacific Ocean, based on an explicit recognition of their shared ocean identity, geography and resources. To deliver on the promise of the blue Pacific, we need a healthy and sustainably-managed ocean. And to do this, we need ocean science.

Ocean science has already been used by Cook Islands, Kiribati, Niue, New Caledonia, French Polynesia, Palau and others to underpin the creation of marine protected areas, and contributes directly to tuna governance in the Pacific where objective and impartial stock assessments (provided by scientists from the Pacific Community) inform decisions in many international bodies. Ocean science helped strengthen the call from Pacific island countries for SDG 14 as a stand-alone oceans goal. Pacific island leaders were active in committing to and calling for ocean action at the recent Our Oceans Conference in Bali. But these efforts are not enough by themselves.

We must do more to address many of the remaining challenges faced by Pacific islands with regard to the sustainable use and management of their ocean space. Lack of capacity to adequately address waste and pollution at the urban/coastal interface remains a challenge in some island nations, directly affecting the health of the ocean and coastal wetlands, with potentially serious consequences for biodiversity and human health. Unsustainable harvesting of oceanic and coastal fisheries resources weakens both fisheries governance and biodiversity conservation efforts. We must curb inappropriate coastal development for aquaculture, tourism or agriculture to avoid the destruction of productive coastal and marine habitats. Inadequate capacity and mechanisms for robust environmental impact assessments are yet another area that requires strengthening in some Pacific island countries. In all these areas and many more, ocean science can contribute to identifying and implementing the solutions required for sustainable use and, therefore, sustainable development and growth.

I am proud to say that the Pacific Community is home to many of the region’s most robust ocean science and technical teams supporting our Pacific island members. Importantly, this includes the Pacific Community Centre for Ocean Science (PCCOS): a new platform to harness ocean science expertise, foster world-class scientific partnerships and focus capacity on concrete development outcomes. Pacific Community is also a lead agency in the recently-signed Pacific-European Union Marine Partnership, which has a large component dedicated to scientific and management advice for oceanic fisheries and sustainable use of coastal and marine biodiversity through improved marine spatial planning, increased resilience to

climate change, and enhanced conservation, mitigation and rehabilitation measures.

As we give life and substance to the blue Pacific narrative over coming years, I am optimistic that we will see science and policy successfully interfacing for greater ocean action in the Pacific. Why? Perhaps because our Pacific peoples feel the ocean, because they live the ocean, and not just because science has convinced them this is the right thing to do. I would venture that science confirms what Pacific islanders know in their hearts.

This is where I believe the Pacific can also serve as a catalyst for global ocean action. We have the science right: the need to protect biodiversity and reduce plastic pollution, the projections around impacts of ocean acidification and warming on fish stocks and livelihoods, and the evidence of the benefits that sustainably-managed ecosystems (such as coastal wetlands) can bring. But if we truly want to move from science to action and ensure that sustainable, science-based initiatives are not sacrificed by those who consider the health of our planet and ocean an acceptable trade-off for short-term political or economic gain, we need to make the personal connection between identity and ocean action.

Epeli Hau'ofa **wrote** “the sea is our pathway to each other and to everyone else... our endless saga... our most powerful metaphor, the ocean is in us”. That eloquent statement of a fundamental ocean identity does not come from science. It comes from the heart of Oceania, from the strength of Pacific cultures and traditions. Imagine how powerful it would be if, following that example, we adopted “the ocean in us” as a collective identity that we own and promote over the course of the UN Decade.

In doing so, we can indeed make the UN Decade a success. We can design visionary, science-based ocean policies and be brave enough to truly act on them. We can collectively shift the promise of the Decade on the page to tangible outcomes for the sustainable development of our ocean. We can ensure the ocean is recognised as part of the climate solution. We can embed the nexus between climate change, oceans and biodiversity in international frameworks like the Convention on Biological Diversity. We can ensure that ocean identity contributes to action and commitment at the 2020 Our Ocean Conference in Palau. By harnessing “the ocean in us” as a catalyst to focus ocean science on concrete action, we can preserve for future generations two of our most precious gifts: our identity and our ocean.

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