

Why the Pacific matters

by Cameron Diver

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Off the coast of Majuro, Marshall Islands (Credit: Cameron Diver)

I often think the Pacific region is, unjustly, treated as the poor cousin of international development. The Pacific is miles away from a major centre of international influence, and is a gigantic ocean space with very little land and, globally speaking, very few people. The attention of world media and, more often than not, the international community only focuses briefly on the Pacific when there is either a major natural disaster or an exceptional sporting event, before the gaze turns away once more. In addition, the Pacific gets **the lowest regional share** of total net overseas development assistance, lagging far behind Africa, Asia, America and Europe.

So why then, you might ask, does the Pacific matter?

The Pacific matters because the Pacific Ocean is the planet's blue lung and, according to some models, **absorbs** around 13% of the annual CO₂ emissions from fossil fuels and industry every year. It matters because increasing plastic pollution, ocean acidification, illegal overfishing, inadequate protection and other unsustainable practices are threatening the world's largest ocean and its resources. In the Pacific, the calls to "save our oceans" and "clean our seas" are not simply catchphrases; they are an urgent necessity requiring global commitment and action.

It matters because the Pacific contributes to worldwide food security, **with over 2.5 million tonnes of tuna caught in Pacific waters each year**. This amounts to **34% of the global annual tuna catch**. It matters because the economic benefit derived from tuna caught in the waters of Pacific island countries was valued at **2.59 billion USD in 2016**, in turn driving employment and economic development, with around **850 million USD remaining in the region**.

It matters because Oceania is home to **three of the world's 35 global biodiversity hotspots**: the East Melanesian Islands, New Caledonia, and Polynesia-Micronesia. These hotspots are home to unique and precious flora and fauna of which over 3,200 are on the **IUCN Red List** of threatened species. **13 World Heritage sites** can also be found throughout the Pacific Islands, with almost 30 more on the tentative list. The Pacific's biodiversity and rich natural and cultural heritage are part of the wealth of our planet, which we must strive, as custodians, to preserve for future

generations.

The Pacific matters because the region, its islands, populations, wildlife and ecosystems are on the front line of climate change. It matters because “Pacific Island countries are internationally **regarded** as a barometer for the early impacts of climate change” and their people are likely to be among the first climate refugees, with some models anticipating between **665,000 and 1.7 million individuals** likely to be displaced due to the ongoing effects of climate change by 2050. It matters because, as landmasses are submerged by sea-level rise, this will raise the question of both the permanence of established maritime boundaries and the sovereignty and sovereign rights exercised by states within and beyond those limits. As such, Oceania is likely to have the sad privilege of being a testing ground for a new chapter in international law as the international community adapts to both people and, potentially, states in climate-enforced exile.

The Pacific also matters because it is home to the ocean continent, Oceania, its 22 island countries and territories plus Australia, France, New Zealand and the United States of America. Of those 22, 12 sovereign states are **members of the United Nations** and **nine are members of the Commonwealth**. Those numbers become 16 and 11 respectively if one includes Australia, France, New Zealand and the United States of America as Pacific members of the UN and Australia and New Zealand as part of the Commonwealth’s Pacific membership. In addition, while many Pacific Island countries are small island developing states, their vote in major international fora, whether individually or as a bloc, carries as much weight as larger, more populous countries.

The Pacific matters because of its increasing geostrategic importance. It is part of the Indo-Pacific axis promoted by French President Emmanuel Macron during his **recent visit to Australia** and in **his address** to assembled Heads of State and Government of the **Pacific Community**. The Pacific region is thus an integral part of this emerging Indo-Pacific vision as a means to maintain security, preserve sovereignty, the free market and the rule of law, and to uphold the regional balance of power. The Pacific is also central to the United Kingdom’s emerging post-Brexit foreign policy, as glimpsed during the recent Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting in London, with plans announced to open **new diplomatic posts** in Samoa, Tonga and Vanuatu and **increase** its overseas development assistance to the region. Australia and New Zealand have also ‘**stepped up**’ and ‘**reset**’ their Pacific engagement in recent weeks, while in past years China has clearly **expanded** its foreign policy and activities in the region. Taken together, this points clearly to the fact that the Pacific does indeed matter in the geopolitical space.

This is only one very personal and admittedly non-exhaustive vision of the Pacific: a

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vast region whose geography makes the tyranny of distance an everyday reality; an ocean continent faced directly with multiple development challenges and whose islands, populations and biodiversity are among the planet's most vulnerable to extreme weather events and the effects of climate change; a region that is, for many reasons, becoming an increasingly coveted player on the geopolitical chessboard. For all of this and more, I am convinced that the Pacific matters and that it should no longer be the poor cousin of international development but a region given equal consideration to other parts of the globe. It has been said that “to save Tuvalu is to save the world”. Given the importance of the entire Pacific region to global biodiversity, carbon reduction, food security, climate action and a myriad of other matters, perhaps the focus of the international community should be, to paraphrase, “to save the Pacific is to save the planet”.

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