

Sacred Ocean Shared Responsibility

Faith-Based Approaches
to Ocean Action

REPORT

MAY 2025

Faiths for UNOC3



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Executive Summary

This report examines the critical role of faith communities in advancing marine conservation globally. With 85% of the world's population adhering to religious traditions, these communities represent a powerful yet often overlooked force for ocean protection. Faith institutions bring unique strengths to conservation efforts: moral authority that transcends political divisions, vast global networks reaching billions of people, deep connections to vulnerable coastal communities, management of significant financial and land resources, and the capacity to inspire value-based behavior change.

Faith at the Forefront: UNOC3 and the 30x30 Ocean Target

The 2025 UN Ocean Conference (UNOC3) in Nice, France, provides a historic opportunity for religious voices to influence global ocean governance and conservation targets, particularly the ambitious goal of protecting 30% of the world's oceans by 2030. This report showcases eleven case studies from diverse faith traditions—ranging from Jewish beach cleanups to Hindu turtle sanctuaries, from Buddhist dolphin conservation to Islamic hima zones—demonstrating concrete ways religious communities transform spiritual values into effective marine stewardship.

The Proven Impact of Faith-Based Conservation

These faith-based initiatives consistently demonstrate faster adoption of sustainable practices, stronger compliance with conservation measures, more effective local enforcement, and greater resilience through political and funding transitions. By integrating spiritual wisdom with environmental science, faith communities create conservation solutions with authenticity and legitimacy that purely technical interventions rarely achieve.

Guiding Values: The 10 Inner Principles and Multi-Faith Declaration

The report introduces “10 Inner Principles for Ocean Conservation” that can guide faith-based engagement with marine protection, from recognizing the ocean as a sacred ancestor to honoring our intergenerational covenant with future generations. It also highlights the UNOC3 Multi-faith Declaration, which articulates a shared spiritual commitment to ocean protection and calls for transformative action in key areas including the 30x30 target, deep-sea mining moratorium, High Seas Treaty ratification, addressing marine pollution, and supporting ocean-based climate solutions.

A Call to Action: Embracing Faith Communities for Ocean Stewardship

As the global community confronts unprecedented threats to ocean health, engaging faith communities as partners in conservation represents one of our most promising strategies for achieving the scale, speed, and sustainability of action needed to protect our shared blue planet for generations to come.

Introduction

Faith communities are a powerful yet often overlooked force for ocean conservation. With deep-rooted moral authority, vast global networks, and strong connections to coastal communities, religious institutions represent an underutilized resource for marine conservation, with 85% of the world's population adhering to faith traditions. These voices offer unique contributions through their established networks, demonstrated capacity to influence policy, and ability to sustain long-term commitments.

The 2025 UN Ocean Conference (UNOC3) in Nice, France this June provides a critical platform for faith voices to shape marine protection policy, influence national commitments for 30x30 goals, and ensure equity in conservation frameworks. Religious leaders bring moral authority that can transform negotiations while their institutions provide the community trust and networks needed for implementation.

Faiths for UNOC3 is a multifaith campaign bringing faiths to the forefront of marine protection at this conference. Supported by Bloomberg Ocean Initiative and Oceans5, the campaign is working to ensure that faith leaders help shape global ocean policies, champion conservation goals, and advocate for equitable, inclusive solutions.

As we continue to develop these resources beyond UNOC3, we welcome diverse perspectives, constructive critiques, and examples of faith-based economic initiatives. Please share your insights at crew@oceans.faith to help ensure these ideas authentically represent the full spectrum of faith-based approaches to ocean stewardship.

Why Faith Communities Matter for Ocean Conservation

By integrating spiritual motivation with scientific understanding, faith communities and religious institutions foster conservation approaches that are both ecologically sound and culturally authentic. These distinctive assets position faith communities to make unique contributions that complement and enhance the work of governments, scientists, and conservation organizations

1. Moral Authority and Values Transformation

Faith leaders can frame ocean protection as a spiritual obligation rather than merely a policy preference. This moral framing transcends political divisions, creating space for consensus around conservation goals. In communities where religious authority carries substantial weight, conservation endorsed by spiritual leaders gains legitimacy that government mandates alone might lack.

2. Cultural and Spiritual Connection to Water

Most religious traditions contain profound teachings about water as sacred—from baptism in Christianity to ritual purification in Judaism and Islam, from the Ganges in Hinduism to the dragon kings of water in Buddhism. These spiritual connections provide foundations for environmental engagement that resonates more deeply than purely scientific or economic arguments.

3. Institutional Networks and Community Reach

Religious institutions maintain vast networks reaching billions through weekly worship, educational programs, and service activities. These established channels efficiently disseminate conservation messages and mobilize community action, often maintaining a continuous presence in remote coastal areas where government agencies or conservation NGOs have limited reach.

4. Long-term Commitment and Intergenerational Vision

Unlike conservation projects dependent on grant cycles or changing political priorities, religious institutions operate with timeframes spanning generations or even centuries. This institutional continuity provides stability for marine conservation initiatives requiring sustained attention.

5. Transformative Education and Values Formation

Religious educational systems reach people at formative stages of development, shaping core values that influence lifelong behavior. By integrating ocean conservation into religious education, faith communities foster environmental ethics as fundamental spiritual values.

6. Financial and Material Resources

Religious institutions collectively control approximately 8% of the Earth's habitable land surface and represent the world's third-largest investing group globally. Faith communities manage approximately US\$5 trillion in assets, with Islamic finance alone estimated at \$4 trillion. These substantial resources can be strategically directed toward conservation ends.

Key Priority Areas Ahead of UNOC3

The 2025 UN Ocean Conference represents a critical moment for advancing global ocean conservation efforts. For faith communities, several key priority areas emerge where religious voices can make particularly significant contributions:

	Accelerating the 30x30 Target: Faith communities can advocate for protecting 30% of the world's oceans by 2030, bringing moral weight to this ambitious conservation goal and supporting effective implementation.
	Supporting the High Seas Treaty Ratification: Religious institutions can create spiritual and ethical frameworks that emphasize the urgency of protecting international waters and mobilize constituencies to advocate for swift treaty implementation.
	Developing Ethical Blue Economies: Faith perspectives on sufficiency, justice, and ecological limits can help transform economic models to honor both human needs and ocean health.
	Integrating Traditional and Scientific Knowledge: Religious communities can facilitate dialogue between different knowledge systems, respecting both indigenous wisdom and contemporary science.
	Ensuring Equitable and Inclusive Participation: Faith voices can advocate for marginalized communities, particularly those most dependent on and vulnerable to changes in marine ecosystems.

Faith for UNOC3 Policy Primer Series

To equip religious communities with the knowledge and tools needed to engage effectively with these priorities, Faiths for UNOC3 has developed a series of policy primers. These resources translate complex ocean policy issues into accessible frameworks that connect with spiritual values and provide concrete action steps for faith-based engagement. Each primer is designed to help religious leaders, institutions, and communities understand key aspects of ocean conservation from both scientific and spiritual perspectives.

- **Understanding UNOC3:** Provides essential information on the conference structure, priorities, and expected outcomes, with guidance on how faith communities can participate effectively. This primer outlines UNOC3's theme, priorities, and expected outcomes, particularly the "Nice Ocean Action Plan," explaining why the conference represents a pivotal opportunity for faith communities.
- **The 30x30 Ocean Target:** Explains the global target to protect 30% of oceans by 2030 from a faith perspective, including theological rationales and practical actions. This primer outlines the scientific case for marine conservation, current progress (only 8.3% protected with just 2.8% effectively protected), and why ocean conservation aligns with core spiritual values.
- **The High Seas Treaty:** Outlines the importance of the High Seas Treaty for international waters and how faith groups can support its ratification. This primer explains why the treaty matters to religious communities and outlines concrete ways they can support its ratification before UNOC3 through the "Race to Ratify" campaign.
- **Blue Moral Economy:** Offers faith-based approaches to ocean finance and sustainable marine resource management. This primer introduces the concept of "blue moral economies" that integrate ethical imperatives from diverse faith traditions with regenerative marine practices, focusing on stewardship, sufficiency, ethical finance, and inclusive participation.
- **Inner Principles:** Presents ten spiritual principles connecting faith traditions with marine conservation action. These principles offer both contemplative insights and practical actions for religious communities to engage meaningfully with ocean protection.

These resources and additional guidance for faith communities are available at: www.oceans.faith/resources

10 Inner Principles for Ocean Conservation

These principles, connect faith and spiritual traditions with marine conservation action. For a deeper exploration of each principle and practical applications for faith communities, visit www.oceans.faith/principles.

	The Ocean as Sacred Ancestor: Embracing the ocean as kin and family, recognizing that we are born of its waters and bound to it through sacred reciprocity.
	Humility Before Depths: Cultivating profound humility in our relationship with the vast and mysterious ocean, acknowledging how its unfathomable depths mirror our own limited understanding.
	Guardianship of the Invisible: Cultivating ocean empathy, and protecting the unseen marine life and processes that sustain Earth's balance.
	Ocean as Teacher and Voice: Opening ourselves to the ocean's wisdom and signals—learning resilience from coral reefs, interconnection from currents, and heeding the warnings in rising tides and bleaching reefs.
	Intertidal Solidarity: Building bridges across faiths, cultures and geographies—like the intertidal zone that connects land and sea—uniting diverse communities in shared reverence and responsibility.
	Ocean Rights and Vulnerable Voices: Recognizing both the inherent rights of marine ecosystems to exist and flourish, and the rights of marginalized coastal communities to lead conservation efforts.



Sacred Blue Boundaries: Understanding ecological limits and marine protected areas as expressions of love rather than restriction, while cultivating economic practices that honor these boundaries.



Commons of Joy: Honoring the sea as both ancestral heritage carrying cultural memory and as a shared global commons deserving collective care.



Inner and Outer Harmony: Recognizing that the health of our inner spiritual ecosystems reflects and influences the health of external marine environments.



Intergenerational Covenant: Preserving ocean integrity for the wellbeing of current and future generations, acknowledging our sacred duty to those who will inherit our marine legacy.

Key Thematic Areas of Faith-Led Marine Conservation

Faith communities worldwide are engaging with ocean conservation across multiple thematic areas, bringing spiritual perspectives and moral authority to complement scientific and policy approaches.

1. Marine Biodiversity Protection

Theological Foundation: Many religious teachings stress the sanctity of non-human life. Christian scriptures convey that God's covenant includes "all living creatures" (Genesis 9), Buddhist doctrines emphasize compassion for all sentient beings, while Islamic teachings highlight the importance of maintaining ecological balance (mizan) in creation.

Implementation Approaches:

- ◉ Designation of "sacred zones" or "hima" areas where no fishing is allowed
- ◉ Reforestation of mangroves as sanctuaries for juvenile marine species
- ◉ Coral reef restoration initiatives guided by spiritual principles
- ◉ Protection of endangered megafauna like dolphins, turtles, and sharks

Impact Mechanisms: Religious leaders influence social attitudes through sermons, festival gatherings, or pilgrimages. This celebratory approach—highlighting the ocean's beauty as evidence of divine creativity—can be more effective than fear-based messaging in motivating conservation actions.

2. Plastic Pollution and Waste Management

Theological Foundation: Religious teachings on stewardship, moderation, and care for creation provide powerful motivations for addressing plastic pollution. Islamic leaders draw on Qur’anic condemnations of wastefulness (israf), Christian communities connect “plastic fasts” with spiritual discipline, and Hindu temples emphasize Vedic principles of purity.

Implementation Approaches:

- ◉ “Plastic fasts” during religious observances like Lent or Ramadan
- ◉ Zero-waste religious festivals and pilgrimages
- ◉ Faith-branded beach and coastal cleanup initiatives
- ◉ Plastic-free policies in religious buildings and facilities
- ◉ Educational campaigns linking consumption patterns to spiritual values

Impact Mechanisms: Places of worship serve as distribution hubs for messages about responsible consumption, reaching constituencies not typically engaged by environmental organizations. The moral framing of plastic reduction as an act of reverence can produce deeper, long-lasting behavior change.



3. Sustainable Fisheries and Ethical Consumption

Theological Foundation: Religious precepts of moderation, justice, and non-harm provide ethical frameworks for sustainable fishing. Islamic scholars may declare destructive fishing methods haram (forbidden), Christian teachings emphasize just harvests and care for vulnerable communities, while Buddhist and Hindu principles of non-injury (ahimsa) discourage indiscriminate fishing practices.

Implementation Approaches:

- ⦿ Religious declarations against destructive fishing methods
- ⦿ Faith-based sustainable seafood campaigns in congregations
- ⦿ Revival of traditional ceremonial fishing closures (e.g., Polynesian rāhui)
- ⦿ Support for fair-trade fisheries that ensure just compensation
- ⦿ Blessing ceremonies for fishing vessels linked to sustainable practices

Impact Mechanisms: Religious sanction often resonates more deeply than secular regulations, particularly in communities where faith leaders hold significant moral authority. By infusing ethical dimensions into fisheries management, faith communities can improve compliance with conservation measures while addressing social justice concerns.



4. Climate Resilience and Adaptation

Theological Foundation: Religious teachings about caring for “the least of these” and stewardship for future generations provide powerful motivations for climate action. Pacific churches highlight biblical narratives like Noah’s Ark to illustrate divine-human partnership in facing catastrophe, while Islamic teachings on responsible trusteeship (khalifah) inform approaches to climate adaptation.

Implementation Approaches:

- ◉ Mangrove planting as both coastal protection and carbon sequestration
- ◉ Coral reef restoration integrated with spiritual practice
- ◉ Faith-based disaster preparedness in vulnerable coastal areas
- ◉ Theological education connecting climate justice with ocean health
- ◉ Religious charity projects supporting climate-resilient livelihoods

Impact Mechanisms: In heavily impacted regions, faith leaders become powerful moral voices for climate justice, connecting local experiences with global advocacy. Religious philanthropy mobilizes resources for adaptation efforts, while spiritual frameworks help communities find meaning and resilience amid climate-driven changes.



5. Community-Based Conservation and Indigenous Faith Traditions

Theological Foundation: Indigenous cosmologies frequently regard humans and nature as part of a single relational community, with spiritual beings or ancestors regulating proper ecological relationships. Customary practices like tabu (Pacific Islands) or sasi laut (Eastern Indonesia) establish guidelines for sustainable resource use based on spiritual principles.

Implementation Approaches:

- ⦿ Revival of traditional sacred closures with contemporary monitoring
- ⦿ Integration of ancestral rituals with marine spatial planning
- ⦿ Documentation of spiritual knowledge about species and habitats
- ⦿ Collaboration between scientists and traditional knowledge holders
- ⦿ Training for religious/traditional leaders in conservation techniques

Impact Mechanisms: Traditional leaders often hold authority to enforce conservation rules more effectively than external agencies could. By validating indigenous spiritual frameworks, conservation initiatives gain cultural authenticity and local buy-in, reducing conflicts that arise from externally imposed regulations.



Case Studies

Introduction

As the global community confronts unprecedented threats to ocean health, faith communities have emerged as powerful yet often overlooked conservation leaders. This collection showcases eleven initiatives where religious institutions advance marine protection by integrating spiritual wisdom with environmental science.

From Hindu devotees protecting sacred turtle nesting grounds, to Buddhist monks advocating for Mekong dolphins, from Islamic marine reserves in Zanzibar to Catholic fisher networks in Brazil—each case demonstrates how spiritual motivation catalyzes conservation outcomes that purely technical approaches rarely achieve.

These faith-based initiatives provide compelling evidence for religious communities' crucial role in achieving global marine conservation targets, including the protection of 30% of the world's oceans by 2030. Their unique strengths—moral authority, institutional permanence, cultural resonance, and ability to inspire deep behavioral change—provide essential complements to scientific conservation strategies.

These initiatives consistently show faster adoption of sustainable practices, stronger compliance, more effective local enforcement, and greater resilience through political and funding transitions. By transforming conservation from external obligation into spiritual practice, faith communities create solutions with authenticity and legitimacy that transcend temporary interventions.

Key SDGs Referenced in Case Studies:

01	SDG 14.1: Prevent and significantly reduce marine pollution	05	SDG 14.A: Increase scientific knowledge and research capacity
02	SDG 14.2: Sustainably manage and protect marine and coastal ecosystems	06	SDG 14.B: Provide access for small-scale artisanal fishers
03	SDG 14.4: Effectively regulate harvesting and end overfishing	07	SDG 12.5: Substantially reduce waste generation
04	SDG 14.5: Conserve coastal and marine areas, with 30% protection by 2030 now the global target	08	SDG 17: Partnerships for sustainable development



Misali Island Hima Marine Reserve: Restoring Prophetic Guardianship in Zanzibar's Reefs

Organization name: Islamic Foundation for Ecology and Environmental Sciences (IFEES)

Website: <https://www.ifees.org.uk>

Faith tradition: Islam

Geographic area: Misali Island Marine Conservation Area, Pemba Island, Zanzibar – Tanzania

Year founded: 1994 (IFEES) | Project launched 1999

Background

Misali Island—an uninhabited 0.9 km² coral-rag islet set inside a 22 km² reef-rich Marine Conservation Area—hosts some of the Indian Ocean’s finest coral slopes and one of Zanzibar’s most important green and hawksbill turtle nesting beaches. Its surrounding waters directly feed 11,400 people in 36 shehias on Muslim-majority Pemba Island (population > 95% Muslim). In the 1990s, foreign trawlers, exploding tourism, and dynamite fishing had left reefs scarred and catches falling.

Conventional patrols achieved little. CARE International and the World Wildlife Fund (WWF) therefore asked IFEES to embed conservation in Islamic law and ethics. With support from the Alliance of Religions and Conservation (ARC) and Zanzibar’s Mufti’s Office, IFEES launched the Misali Islamic Environmental Ethics Project to:

- ⦿ Surface Qur’anic stewardship principles,
- ⦿ Sensitize marine-resource users to the Islamic conservation ethic, and
- ⦿ Implement these teachings through an integrated conservation-and-development programme.

Three 1999 workshops used an education pack on “Qur’an, Creation & Conservation” to link verses such as Qur’an 55:10 (“He set the earth for all beings”) to sustainable fishing. Participants—fishers, madrasa teachers, local officials and ulema—agreed to designate Misali a hima, a historic Sharia protected-area model. In 2001, the Mufti’s decree fused this faith covenant with state law inside the existing marine park. A 200-page Teachers’ Guide, launched on 29 February 2008 and hailed as “the world’s first Islamic conservation manual,” now anchors marine ethics in school curricula and Friday sermons.



Impact

Since the hima proclamation, Misali has become a living demonstration of Islam's capacity to advance marine conservation. Dynamite blasts—once weekly—have nearly vanished, while coral-cover surveys show recovery from 31% to 45% between 2001 and 2023, delivering clear progress on SDG 14.2's mandate to protect marine ecosystems. Nest-monitoring teams record turtle hatching success above 70%, among East Africa's highest. Community-generated reef and catch logs supply Zanzibar's fisheries department with quarterly data, addressing knowledge gaps identified in SDG 14.A.

Behavior change follows theology: post-workshop polling shows 82% of fishers now describe dynamite and juvenile nets as *ḥarām* (forbidden), reducing destructive gear use in alignment with SDG 12.5. Ridge-to-reef dividends are visible: 20,000 up-cycled bottles now serve as rain-catchment tanks in hill villages, easing aquifer pressure and preventing plastics from washing seaward, supporting SDG 6. Beyond Zanzibar, the Misali model has sparked pilot hima zones on Tanzania's Mafia Island and in the Comoros, expanding Islamic stewardship corridors and creating the diverse faith-led partnerships envisioned in SDG 17—critical for financing and implementing the global 30×30 pledge.

Implementation

The initiative combines Islamic prayer practices with conservation activities, incorporating Qur'anic teachings into regular patrol activities. Local fishers and youth participate in reef monitoring, collecting data that supports both scientific assessment and community ownership. Spiritual connection is deepened through meditation practices over coral gardens, and recovered materials are repurposed into religious items, connecting waste reduction with worship. Multi-sector partnerships between religious institutions, conservation organizations, and local businesses provide sustainable support for ongoing protection efforts.

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Donexay Fish Conservation Zone: Buddhist Monks Safeguarding Mekong Fisheries

Organization name: Donexay Fish Conservation Zone, supported by FISHBIO and Donexay Buddhist Temple

Website: <https://fishbio.com/>

Faith tradition: Buddhism

Geographic area: Donexay Village, Nam Kading River (Mekong tributary), Bolikhamxay Province, Lao PDR

Year: 2010 (local decree of closure)

Background

The Nam Kading River is a biodiversity-rich tributary of the Mekong, yet heavy gill-netting and electro-fishing had begun to erode the catch that sustains Donexay's 150 Khmer-Lao households. After visiting neighboring villages that had created no-take sanctuaries, Donexay's head monk proposed establishing a Fish Conservation Zone (FCZ)—a stretch of river declared off-limits to fishing under the moral authority of the temple. His idea resonated with the Buddhist precept of *ahimsā* (non-harm to living beings), and with the cultural merit of releasing or feeding fish as acts of compassion.

With technical support from the California- and Lao-based NGO FISHBIO, the village council demarcated a 400-metre reach of deep pool and riffle as an FCZ in 2010, passed a by-law endorsed by district fisheries officers, and appointed a mixed patrol of monks and fishers to enforce the ban.

A simple ecotourism platform was built beside the monastery: visitors donate 5,000 kip (US \$0.60) for a bottle of feed pellets, pour them down a bamboo chute, and watch the water erupt with silver barbs and mahseer — an experience designed to kindle reverence and generate maintenance funds.

Impact

The Donexay FCZ demonstrates how Buddhist values can advance conservation targets. Twelve years after implementation, underwater surveys show a tripling of visible biomass at the feeding platform, and village elders report the return of large-bodied *Probarbus jullieni* during the dry-season migration—an iconic Mekong species considered Vulnerable by the IUCN Red List.

The sanctuary's success has reduced gear conflicts: interviews conducted by FISHBIO found a 70% drop in disputes over net placement since the FCZ began, aligning with research from Thailand where FCZs strengthened community cohesion and revived Critically Endangered species such as *Pangasianodon gigas*.

Economically, the temple's modest ecotourism earned US \$1,900 in 2023—enough to stock feed, fund two scholarships, and cover fuel for night patrols. Behaviorally, 85% of households surveyed in 2022 declared they now release a portion of their catch on Buddhist holy days, an emergent form of “conservation merit-making” that supports SDG 12.8's focus on sustainable lifestyles.

Neighboring Ban Houayla has begun drafting its own decree after witnessing Donexay's revival, demonstrating how these models can scale across landscapes.

The project contributes to several SDGs, including SDG 14.2 (ecosystem protection), SDG 14.4 (ending destructive fishing), and SDG 15.1 (conservation of freshwater ecosystems)—showing how faith-based approaches can bridge marine and freshwater conservation goals.

Implementation

Buddhist monks lead conservation through monastic influence, connecting daily prayers and teachings to river protection. Temple-guided enforcement blends spiritual and social accountability, with violations addressed through community ceremonies. Young people participate through citizen science, documenting ecosystem changes using accessible technology while building pride in their conservation role. The initiative creates sustainable funding mechanisms through ecotourism that supports both conservation and community development while replacing destructive fishing gear with sustainable alternatives.

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Reverse Tashlich: A Jewish Ritual Transforming Global Ocean Stewardship

Organization name: Repair the Sea (Tikkun HaYam)

Website: <https://www.repairthesea.org/>

Faith tradition: Judaism

Geographic area: Tampa, USA, Global operations in 30 countries

Year founded: 2016

Background

“If we don’t repair the Sea, nothing else stands a chance.” Rabbi Ed Rosenthal’s declaration reframes ocean health as a covenantal duty. On Rosh HaShanah, many Jews perform

Tashlich, casting crumbs into water to symbolically release mis-steps. In 2016, Rosenthal and a group of students inverted the rite: instead of adding breadcrumbs, they lifted humanity’s “sins” out—tires, ghost-nets, and micro-plastics—from the shoreline. This seed grew into Reverse Tashlich, now the world’s largest annual Jewish waterfront clean-up.

Repair the Sea’s mission is to share the spiritual wonders of water from a Jewish perspective, foster inter-faith cooperation, and mobilize action on ocean threats. Study sheets link Psalm 95:5 (“The sea is God’s”) and Genesis 2:15 (“till and keep”) to SDG 14, rooting the project in *bal tashchit* (do not destroy) and *tikkun olam* (repair the world).

Volunteers log every litter item with NOAA’s Marine Debris Tracker app, turning ritual into open data. In 2024, 283 communities across six continents removed 11 tonnes of debris, proving that faith-anchored action can yield hard metrics for ocean recovery.

Impact

Reverse Tashlich translates liturgy into measurable progress on ocean conservation. In 2024 alone, volunteers removed 11 tonnes of marine debris, directly contributing to SDG 14.1’s goal of reducing marine pollution.

Every item collected is geotagged using NOAA’s Marine Debris Tracker, creating a crowd-sourced dataset now used by planners in Florida, Auckland, and Mombasa to refine marine-protected-area boundaries—providing science-based evidence for effective conservation planning.

The ritual’s reach extends beyond cleanup activities. More than 3,000 faith-motivated citizen scientists in 30 countries expand the monitoring workforce far beyond government capacity, supporting SDG 14.A by enhancing scientific knowledge. Follow-up surveys show 64 percent of participants reduced single-use plastics during the Ten Days of Awe, addressing pollution at its source in line with SDG 12.5.

Ridge-to-reef co-benefits are tangible: 287 tires removed from a New Zealand creek reopened spawning grounds, while 20,000 Ugandan bottles were up-cycled into rain-catchment tanks, creating synergies between SDG 6 (clean water) and coastal resilience. The movement’s adoption by at least ten other faith traditions enhances the partnerships envisioned under SDG 17, mobilizing diverse, values-driven constituencies for marine conservation.

Implementation

The program creates a meaningful framework through a “Reverse Tashlich Pack” with liturgy and educational materials connecting Jewish teachings to ocean conservation. Cleanups are strategically timed during the Jewish High Holy Days, combining spiritual significance with practical action. Participants document their impact through citizen science, creating both ecological data and spiritual connection. The initiative builds broader engagement through interfaith partnerships and transforms collected debris into ritual objects, embedding conservation into religious practice.

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A Rocha Marine Conservation Programme: A Global Christian Network Restoring Coastal Creation

Organization name: A Rocha International

Website: <https://arocha.org>

Faith tradition: Christian

Geographic area: 22 countries on six continents | International secretariat in the UK

Year founded: 1983. Marine Conservation Programme formalized 2017

Background

A Rocha began as a bird observatory on Portugal's Ria de Alvor estuary and has grown into a family of 22 national organizations that blend evangelical faith with rigorous science to "see nature protected and people restored." The Marine Conservation Programme (MCP) coordinates that family's coastal work, from Kenyan reefs to Canadian salmon rivers, and frames it theologically through "blue theology," which recognizes the ocean as God's gift and calls Christians to serve their marine neighbors.

A Rocha works around the world to study, protect and restore marine habitats and biodiversity, raise awareness of marine pollution, develop resources and build capacity in support of coastal areas. Both science and faith guide their work to help the ocean flourish. The organization believes that science-based marine conservation reveals, conserves, and restores "the hidden things of God in the ocean," integrating Christian faith and marine conservation for ocean transformation.

The group studies and protects a fascinating variety of wetland and marine ecosystems: a Portuguese estuary, Ghanaian mangrove forests, Canadian salmon rivers and seagrass beds, Kenyan coral reefs, British beaches and kelp forests, and New Zealand rocky shores, to name just a few. Through theological reflection on marine issues, they integrate Christian faith and community-based conservation, examining these issues in cooperation with others and from varied cross-cultural perspectives.

Impact

Across its 22-country network, A Rocha marries scripture and science to yield measurable gains. Coral-cover transects in Watamu show a 12% rise since 2016, and sightings of Critically Endangered Halavi Guitarfish have increased, prompting stricter anchoring rules. Ghanaian nurseries have raised 95,000 mangrove seedlings, stabilizing creek banks and boosting fisheries for 1,200 households. New Zealand celebrated the first chick fledging on Karioi maunga in living memory after predator control.

Plastic reduction initiatives scale effectively through faith networks: more than 150 congregations and schools downloaded the Plastics Toolbox in 2023, coordinating clean-ups that removed 18 tonnes of litter, supporting SDG 14.1. Florida nurdle surveys informed Brevard County's lagoon-task-force clean-up prioritization. Through Climate Stewards, supporters offset 35,000 t CO₂e in 2022, funding mangroves that sequester blue carbon and shelter juvenile fish.

Equally important, worship packs—such as low-tide Psalms and Sea-Sunday liturgies—embed marine conservation in church life, nurturing both local and global constituencies committed to ocean stewardship. A Rocha's work directly supports multiple targets within SDG 14, including preventing marine pollution, managing coastal ecosystems, conserving marine areas, and increasing scientific knowledge and research capacity.

Implementation

A Rocha's approach centers on protecting diverse marine ecosystems through scientific research infused with Christian theological perspectives. Their multilingual resources combine spiritual teachings with practical conservation guidance, making marine protection accessible across cultural contexts. Community partnerships focus on sustainable livelihoods, particularly for fishers, while also nurturing spiritual connections to marine environments through contemplative practices. Their Climate Stewards initiative funds blue carbon projects that both sequester carbon and protect coastal communities.

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Green Faith Indonesia: A Multi-Religious Front Confronting “Ocean Grabbing”

Organization name: Green Faith Indonesia

Website: <https://greenfaith.org/indonesia/>

Faith tradition: Islam — active inter-faith collaboration

Geographic area: Maluku Province, Rupert Island, Riau Province, West Nusa Tenggara Province, Indonesia

Year founded: 2020

Background

Indonesia—an archipelago of more than 17 000 islands—is home to the planet’s richest coral reefs and, increasingly, to high-stakes ocean grabbing: coastal reclamations, sea-sand mining, and industrial trawling that strip artisanal fishers of both habitat and livelihood. From 2014 to 2020, a Muslim grassroots organiser campaigned with the People’s Coalition for Fisheries Justice and Friends of the Earth–Indonesia, helping to derail major projects in Jakarta Bay and Bali’s 1 400-hectare Benoa Bay. The experience revealed two insights:

1. **Legal victories need a moral engine.** Qur’anic concepts of *amanah* (trusteeship) and *la tufsidu fil-ard* (“do not corrupt the earth,” Q 7 : 56) proved as persuasive in public hearings as environmental-impact data.
2. **Indonesia’s pluralism is an ecological asset.** Catholic priests who joined the campaigns found resonance between Qur’anic stewardship and Biblical creation care.

To harness that ethical power, the activists formalised their partnership in 2020 as **Green Faith Indonesia (GFI). The organisation now mobilises Muslim, Catholic and Indigenous communities around three place-based projects—coral-reef restoration in Maluku, a no-trawl fishing sanctuary off Rupat Island (Riau), and mangrove rehabilitation in West Nusa Tenggara—while continuing nationwide advocacy against ocean-grabbing licences and for climate-justice legislation.**

Impact

Green Faith Indonesia’s blend of Qur’anic stewardship, customary *sasi laut* and inter-faith advocacy has successfully influenced both policy and ecology along three coastlines. Legal briefs—citing *amanah*, Pope Francis’ *Laudato Si’* and Indonesia’s constitution—helped persuade governors to scrap the 1,400-hectare Benoa Bay reclamation and freeze sea-sand licenses in Jakarta Bay. These decisions preserved seagrass, coral and fishing grounds that small-scale fishers depend on, earning recognition from Mongabay as landmark wins against “ocean grabbing.”

On the water, revived *sasi laut* closures in Maluku now support low-tech coral “reef-star” nurseries; preliminary surveys by Universitas Pattimura show higher juvenile-coral counts than on neighboring, open-access reefs. North Rupat’s faith-brokered no-trawl by-law has reduced gear conflicts and stabilized banana-prawn and rabbit-fish landings according to village catch diaries, demonstrating how spiritual authority can reinforce sustainable fishing norms in line with SDG 14.4.

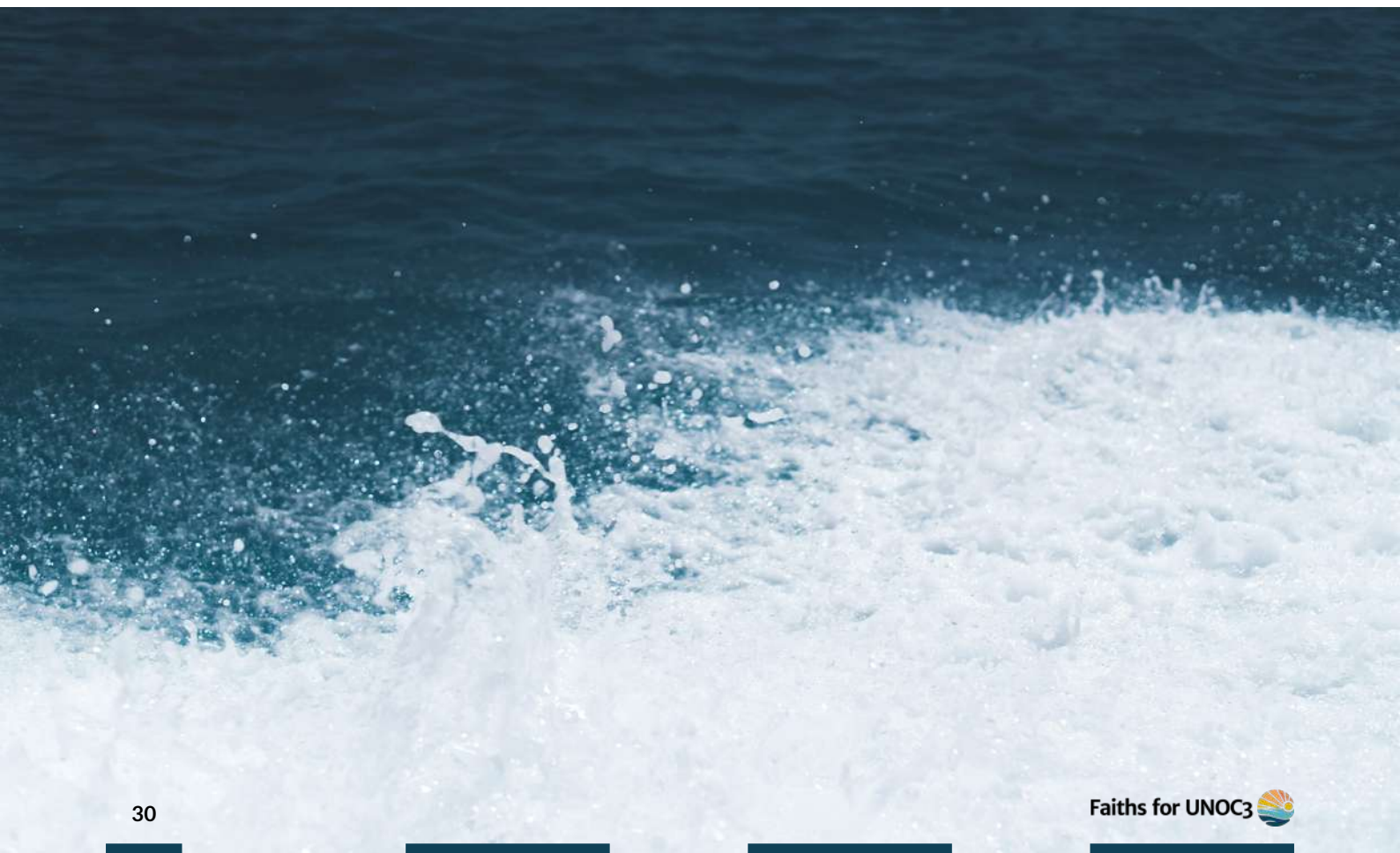
Tens of thousands of mangroves planted along Mandalika’s erosion-prone coast—backed by Friday sermons on *rahmah* and Catholic rosary vigils—now appear on West Nusa Tenggara’s blue-economy roadmap as storm surge protection and future blue-carbon credits. The social impact is equally significant: quarterly gatherings now draw some 300 fishers, imams, priests and adat elders; post-workshop polls show 83 percent can quote both Qur’anic and Biblical verses on marine stewardship. This shared moral narrative strengthens community resolve and provides government officials with a constituency for implementing SDG 14—proving that in the world’s largest multi-faith archipelago, ocean care can become common ground rather than contested territory.

Implementation

The initiative revitalizes traditional management systems like sasi laut by combining them with interfaith spiritual practices. Community-led protection zones are established through religious forums that build consensus across faith boundaries, marked with blessed boundary markers. Religious leaders integrate conservation messages into regular worship services and organize interfaith planting events. The organization systematically builds capacity through its “Ocean-Justice Madrasa” training program while mobilizing faith-based arguments in legal advocacy against harmful coastal development.

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Interfaith Ocean Ethics Campaign: Mobilising Faith Communities for a Blue Moral Awakening

Organization name: Interfaith Ocean Ethics Campaign – a programme of the Franciscan Action Network (FAN) and the National Religious Coalition on Creation Care (NRCCC)

Website: <https://www.interfaithoceans.org/>

Faith tradition: Multi-faith

Geographic area: United States (resources shared globally)

Active years: 2015 – 2018 (project concluded)

Background

When the late Pope Francis released *Laudato Si'* in mid-2015, U.S. faith groups surged into climate advocacy—but oceans still felt distant to most pulpits. FAN and NRCCC convened marine scientists, theologians and campaigners at the World Stewardship Institute in California to craft a message that could bridge that gap. Out of that retreat came the Interfaith Ocean Ethics Campaign (IOEC), launched on 23 March 2015.

The organisers distilled NOAA trend data into a memorable moral framework: the “Seven Deadly Sins of the Seas.” Each sin—acidification from fossil fuels, over- and cruel fishing, plastic pollution, toxic runoff, invasive/species cruelty, destructive coastal development, and sensory noise—was paired with a “Seven Virtuous Steps of the Seas”, a staircase of action that begins with wonder and gratitude and climbs through household change, congregational mobilisation, hands-on restoration, and finally public-policy advocacy. By moving seamlessly from lament to remedy, IOEC sought to replace ocean despair with disciplined hope.

Partnerships followed. Ocean Conservancy, The Ocean Project and NOAA educators offered science briefings, while NRDC and Conservation Law Foundation channelled IOEC’s newly mobilised clergy into campaigns for Atlantic marine monuments.

The campaign’s motto—“So what we do to the oceans, we do to ourselves”—echoed Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew’s teaching and framed marine care as a justice duty to the poor, to future generations and to “our brother-and-sister species.”

Implementation

The campaign developed accessible educational resources framing ocean threats as “Seven Deadly Sins” paired with “Seven Virtuous Steps” that guide congregations from spiritual awareness to concrete action. Congregation-based small groups followed a progressive engagement model from personal practice to community projects and policy advocacy.

Monthly webinars created dialogue between scientific and religious perspectives, while “pulpit swap” events built interfaith solidarity. The initiative mobilized coordinated advocacy focused on specific marine protected area designations, demonstrating the collective power of faith-based voices.

Impact

IOEC's three-year burst left a legacy greater than its lifespan. Toolkit analytics show downloads in 21 countries, but its main field was the U.S. Atlantic. Faith-group op-eds, clergy letters and public-comment testimonies were repeatedly cited by Ocean Conservancy and Conservation Law Foundation as vital moral ballast for the 2016 creation of the Northeast Canyons & Seamounts Marine National Monument, the nation's first Atlantic marine national monument.

Congregational surveys (FAN, 2018) found 68% of participating groups launched at least one concrete action beyond worship—most often a plastics fast, beach-cleanup weekend or seafood-watch commitment. Although the parallel Cashes Ledge proposal stalled, CLF still references IOEC's clergy mobilisation as a template for future sanctuary bids.

Equally significant was the cultural shift inside faith communities: pastors and imams reported higher demand for “blue liturgies,” and seminary eco-theology syllabi began citing the Deadly-Sin/Virtuous-Step matrix. Toolkit downloads spiked again ahead of COP 26 (2021), illustrating the staying power of the IOEC framing even after the campaign had formally concluded.

Though IOEC concluded before the formal adoption of the 30×30 target under the Kunming-Montreal Global Biodiversity Framework, its work anticipated key elements of the current ocean conservation agenda.

The campaign's focus on marine protected areas, particularly the Northeast Canyons & Seamounts Marine National Monument, directly contributed to SDG 14.5 (conservation of coastal and marine areas). Its educational materials addressing ocean acidification and plastic pollution supported SDG 14.1 (preventing and reducing marine pollution) and SDG 14.3 (minimizing ocean acidification impacts).

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Podampeta Turtle-Guardians: Hindu Devotion and Community Stewardship at Odisha's Rushikulya Rookery

Organization name: Podampeta Turtle Protection Volunteers (informal village collective)

Faith tradition: Hindu

Geographic area: Podampeta-Gokharakuda shoreline, Rushikulya river mouth, Ganjam District, Odisha, India

Year founded: 1994 (volunteer patrols began)

Background

Odisha's Rushikulya river mouth hosts the world's second-largest arribada — a Spanish term biologists use for the “mass arrival” of nesting Olive Ridley females. In the early 1990s egg-poaching, stray-dog predation and shrimp-trawler by-catch threatened this wonder: more than 90,000 carcasses were recorded between 1994 and 2004.

For the fisher-folk of Podampeta, however, the turtles are Kurma, the turtle incarnation of Vishnu and a sign of prosperity. Seeing sacred duty where outsiders saw only wildlife, villagers organized night patrols in 1994, years before formal protection reached the beach.

Their faith-rooted initiative later dovetailed with Forest-Department protocols and the Indian Coast Guard's seasonal Operation Olivia.

Impact

In 2024 more than 6.4 lakh (640,000) Olive Ridley females nested along the Podampeta–Prayagi stretch, a new state record. Forest officials attribute the surge to community fencing, reduced dog predation and protection from Operation Olivia patrols.

Village catch diaries show fewer gear conflicts and stable incomes, thanks in part to micro-tourism during turtle season. State leaders now cite Podampeta as a model of “people-and-faith-led conservation,” and neighboring villages have launched similar patrols.

The Podampeta Turtle-Guardians initiative directly supports multiple SDG 14 targets, particularly SDG 14.2 (sustainable management and protection of marine and coastal ecosystems) and SDG 14.4 (effectively regulating harvesting, ending overfishing and destructive fishing practices).

Their advocacy for Turtle-Excluder Devices also contributes to SDG 14.1 (preventing and reducing marine pollution) by reducing by-catch mortality of endangered species.

By mobilizing local actors and integrating traditional knowledge with scientific monitoring, the Podampeta initiative demonstrates how indigenous and faith-based communities can contribute effectively to the global 30×30 target of conserving at least 30% of coastal and marine areas by 2030.

The project also showcases sustainable economic models that align conservation with livelihood enhancement—a key priority for implementing SDG 14.

Implementation

Community members conduct night patrols as sacred service, chanting religious phrases while protecting nesting turtles. Tourism is carefully managed through dedicated zones that balance visitor experience with turtle protection, generating alternative income for fishers.

Conservation activities like hatchling rescue are performed with traditional prayers, reinforcing spiritual connection. Village elders advocate for policy measures like Turtle Excluder Devices while participating in scientific monitoring, bridging traditional knowledge with contemporary conservation science.

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Pastoral da Pesca (CPP): “Casting Nets of Justice” — Brazil’s Catholic Movement Safeguarding Artisanal Fishers and Coastal Creation

Organization name: Conselho Pastoral dos Pescadores – Pastoral da Pesca

Faith tradition: Roman Catholic

Geographic area: Entire Brazilian coastline and river-flood-plains (Amazon to South-east)

Year founded: 1975

Background

In the Catholic Church of Brazil the word pastoral means a mission team that “shepherds” a specific group: there is a Pastoral da Criança for vulnerable children, a Pastoral da Terra for landless farmers— and, since 1971, a Pastoral da Pesca (“Fishing Pastoral”) for artisanal fishers.

Its formal title, Conselho Pastoral dos Pescadores (CPP), translates as the Pastoral Council of Fishers. Rooted in Vatican II’s call to read “the signs of the times,” clergy and lay leaders saw coastal families threatened by industrial trawlers, mangrove clearance and violent land grabs.

They wove Catholic Social Teaching—dignity of labour, preferential option for the poor—and biblical stewardship (Genesis 2 : 15; Luke 5 : 4–11) into a ministry that walks the beach with nets in one hand and the Gospel in the other.

Today CPP operates through 18 diocesan teams, proclaiming that a healthy sea is both a gift from the Creator and a human right. Its twin vocation is pastoral care (holding boat blessings, celebrating Eucharist on the sand) and prophetic advocacy (legal aid, policy lobbying, habitat restoration). This fusion of spirituality and social action has made CPP the Catholic Church’s primary voice for ocean justice in Brazil, echoing Pope Francis’s *Laudato Si’* at street and shoreline level.

Impact

Between 2000 and 2023 CPP legal teams supported the creation of 28 Marine and Riverine Extractive Reserves that together protect more than 1.1 million ha of mangrove, seagrass and floodplain habitat—direct delivery on SDG 14.5 and Brazil’s 30×30 pathway.

In Pernambuco, a women-run CPP nursery has replanted 50 ha of mangrove since 2016; crab landings measured by the state agency rose 32% in adjacent creeks by 2022. CPP’s conflict reports prompted the Federal Prosecutor’s Office to open 19 inquiries into pollution and land grabbing between 2018-2022, giving fishers new legal traction.

The 2024 Grito helped persuade Brazil’s Ministry of Fisheries to launch the Artisanal Fishing Peoples Programme, which pledges micro-credit, scholarships and recognition of traditional territories. For faith formation, CPP’s “Course on Theology of the Waters” has trained 640 pastoral agents since 2019, mainstreaming ocean care into catechesis.

CPP’s work directly supports multiple SDG 14 targets, especially SDG 14.2 (sustainable management and protection of marine and coastal ecosystems), SDG 14.5 (conservation of coastal and marine areas), and SDG 14.B (providing access for small-scale artisanal fishers to marine resources and markets).

The organization's success in establishing Marine Extractive Reserves (RESEXs) contributes significantly to Brazil's progress toward the global 30×30 target of effectively conserving at least 30% of marine and coastal areas by 2030.

By integrating Catholic social teaching with indigenous ecological knowledge and formal legal processes, CPP provides a model for the “whole-of-society” engagement needed to achieve SDG 14.

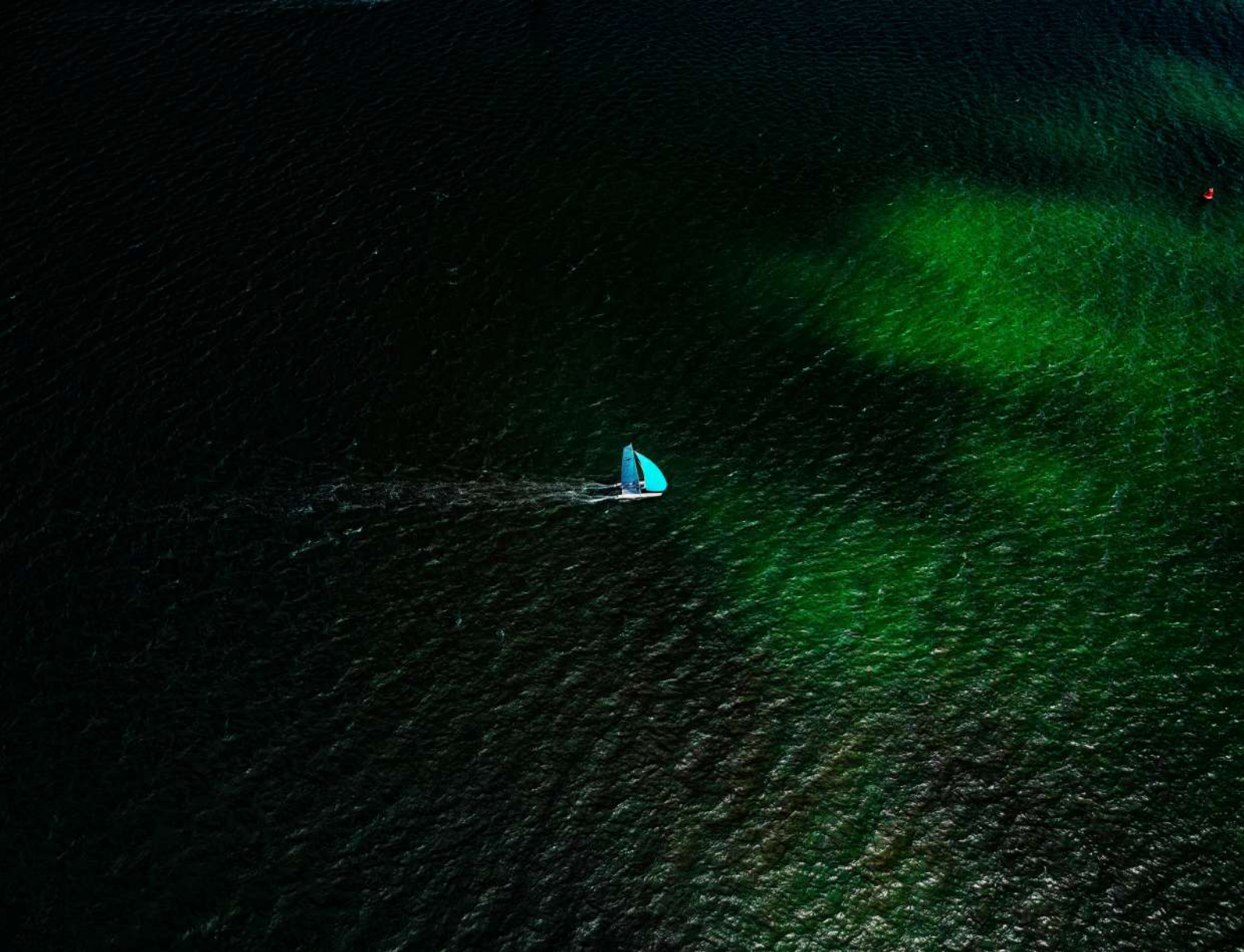
Implementation

Parish-based teams help coastal communities map their traditional fishing territories, documenting both ecological and spiritual significance. Community assemblies establish sustainable fishing regulations that receive religious blessing during Mass, enhancing compliance through spiritual authority.

Legal advocacy transforms customary practices into formally protected areas, creating lasting conservation impact. Annual national gatherings combine religious ceremony, policy advocacy, and public demonstrations, while systematic documentation of environmental conflicts provides evidence for legal intervention. The initiative sustains its work through diverse funding including religious donations, international aid, and government support.

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Ecumenical Patriarchate: “Blue Theology” and the Green Patriarch’s Global Witness for the Seas

Organization name: Ecumenical Patriarchate of Constantinople (Office of Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew I)

Faith tradition: Eastern Orthodox Christianity

Geographic area: Global ministry headquartered in Istanbul, Türkiye

Environmental ministry launched: September 1989 (first encyclical on creation care; Bartholomew elected 1991)

Background

Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew I—hailed by Time and UNEP as the “Green Patriarch”—has spent three decades teaching that “a crime against nature is a sin against God.” Orthodox worship is steeped in water symbolism, so Bartholomew chose oceans and great rivers as the pulpit for a “blue theology” that weds sacramental vision to scientific urgency. Beginning in 1995 his Religion-Science-Environment symposia ferried bishops, biologists and journalists through polluted waters; in 2005 UNEP named him a Champion of the Earth, the first religious leader so honored. His prophetic voice now echoes in multilateral halls—from informal briefings ahead of the 2015 Paris Agreement to a keynote address at the 9th Our Ocean Conference in Athens (16 Apr 2024) where he urged leaders to link marine health, climate justice and peace.

Impact

Bartholomew’s sustained “blue ministry” has transformed moral witness into policy action. The 1997 Black Sea symposium preceded a 44% drop in illegal oil releases (1997-2002) recorded by the Black Sea Commission. Recommendations from the 1999 Danube voyage fed an EU nutrient-reduction plan credited with cutting phosphates by up to 30% within six years. The Mississippi symposium (2009) elevated wetland loss onto U.S. congressional agendas during post-Katrina funding debates. At Athens 2024, his keynote helped Greece marshal €1.8 billion in new marine-protection pledges; the chair’s summary explicitly cites “partnership with religious leaders” as a success factor. Beyond high-level engagement, parish-level river blessing clean-ups and plastic-ban campaigns across five continents demonstrate that Blue Theology inspires faithful stewardship on shorelines worldwide, reinforcing SDG 14 and the 30×30 marine target.

The Patriarch’s approach directly supports multiple SDG 14 targets, particularly SDG 14.1 (preventing and reducing marine pollution) and SDG 14.2 (sustainable management and protection of marine and coastal ecosystems). By bringing Orthodox spiritual perspectives into high-level ocean policy forums, the Patriarch has helped expand support for the 30×30 global target.

Implementation

The Patriarchate pioneered engagement in floating symposia that brought religious leaders, scientists, and policymakers together to witness environmental challenges firsthand. High-level diplomatic engagement brings spiritual perspectives to international policy forums, influencing outcomes through moral framing. Educational resources integrate traditional ceremonies with contemporary conservation practices, making ancient rituals relevant to modern environmental challenges. The initiative builds cross-sector coalitions between faith communities, scientific institutions, and conservation organizations while mobilizing youth through dedicated summits and media engagement.

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Saffron Guardians of the Mekong: Cambodian Monks Defend the Sacred Irrawaddy Dolphin

Organization name: Association of Buddhists for the Environment (ABE) and Monks Community for the Environment (MCE) – in partnership with WWF-Cambodia

Faith tradition: Theravada Buddhism

Geographic area: Kratie Province, Cambodia – eight pagodas in Sambor & Kampong Cham communes, Koh Pdao Island and a 180 km dolphin core zone on the Mekong

Year founded: ABE 2005 (dolphin campaign launched 2011); MCE network 2017

Background

Irrawaddy dolphins (*Orcaella brevirostris*) are revered in Khmer Buddhism as neak maki—river spirits whose presence brings merit and prosperity. Yet by 2010 their Mekong sub-population had fallen below 90 individuals because of gill-net by-catch and river pollution. On 28 January 2011, at Kratie’s historic 100-Pillar Pagoda, Supreme Patriarch Samdech Bour Kry issued the “Highest Sacred Advice on Saving the Mekong Dolphin from Extinction,” urging monks and villagers to treat dolphin protection as a karmic duty. ABE and WWF-Cambodia embraced this spiritual guidance, launching a faith-led program that connected Buddhist compassion to species preservation and local eco-tourism livelihoods.

Impact

Monastic moral authority has transformed both community practice and national policy. WWF monitoring shows an approximately 45% drop in deep-pool gill-netting between 2012-2020, while dolphin entanglement deaths fell from nine (2012) to three (2021). Population surveys indicate that the Mekong dolphin has stabilized at about 85–92 individuals (2023), ending decades of decline. Eco-tourism receipts in Sambor villages climbed 28% from 2016-2022, cushioning income lost to gear changes. At the policy level, monk-led advocacy produced Cambodia’s first river-wide gill-net exclusion (2012) and the 2025 22,000-ha sanctuary—legal milestones that align the kingdom with the 2023 Global Declaration for River Dolphins.

Beyond cetaceans, the MCE network now coordinates snare-removal patrols and tree-ordination ceremonies, broadening Buddhist conservation to forests and terrestrial wildlife. This holistic approach supports multiple environmental goals, including SDG 14.4 (ending destructive fishing practices), SDG 15.1 (conservation of freshwater ecosystems), and SDG 15.5 (reducing degradation of natural habitats and halting biodiversity loss).

Implementation

Religious leaders received scientific training while maintaining their spiritual authority, enabling them to communicate conservation in culturally resonant terms. Monastery-centered outreach includes regular teachings and water blessing ceremonies that reach thousands of community members. Monks mediate agreements on fishing practices, leveraging their trusted position to achieve changes that government regulations alone could not accomplish. Community patrols receive religious blessing, enhancing their perceived authority and effectiveness. The initiative has expanded through a national network of monasteries using standardized conservation training materials, while applying lessons from forest protection to river conservation. Monks advocate directly with government ministries, influencing national policy through their moral authority.

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Sacred Rāhui of Rapa Iti: Polynesian Tapu Re-expressed through Protestant Ritual to Guard Island Seas

Organization name: Tomite taià (Fishing Committee) & Conseil des Sages / Toohitu (Elders' Council) — with the Maohi Protestant parish

Faith tradition: Indigenous Polynesian cosmology interpreted through Protestant Christianity

Geographic area: Rapa Iti, Austral Islands, French Polynesia

Year revived: 1984 (modern rāhui ordinance passed by the municipal council)

Background

Rapa Iti is the most remote of French Polynesia's inhabited islands, a steep volcanic crescent 1,240 km south of Tahiti. For its 500 Maohi residents, *fenua*—land, sea and ancestors—forms an indivisible whole: people inherit not ownership but guardianship.

Pre-missionary Rapa enforced that guardianship through *iki*, a tapu that temporarily closed valleys, reefs or fruit groves so they could regenerate. When Protestant missionaries arrived in the 1820s, the island converted but retained the logic of sacred closure, now expressed in Biblical language of stewardship.

By the late 1970s new outboard motors and battery torches allowed night raids that stripped reefs of lobster and parrotfish; islanders feared a return of the famine stories their grandparents told. In 1984 the elected mayor and elders voted to revive the ancient tapu as a modern *rāhui*, anchoring it in two parallel authorities: the *Conseil des Sages* (Toohitu) for land and the Tomite taià for the sea.

To bind the prohibition spiritually, the island's Maohi Protestant pastor was woven into the ritual, blessing both the annual "loosening" and "re-sealing" of the *rāhui*. This harmonious integration—ancestral tapu plus Christian covenant—transformed marine restraint into a community-wide moral contract powerful enough to stand against French open-access law and occasional incursions by outside fishing boats.

Impact

Underwater surveys (National Geographic 2014; Tomite taià 2019) record double the fish biomass and 3–4× lobster density inside the *rāhui* compared with open bays, creating a spill-over that shortens fishing trips and saves scarce fuel. Household monitoring (Mayor's Office 2022) shows 94% of residents consider the *rāhui* essential for unity; the annual opening — hymn, shared labor, equal sharing of ~5 tonnes of fish — is the island's signature celebration.

During the 2021 supply-ship delay, a one-day emergency opening delivered 3.4 tonnes of protein, proving the *rāhui* a living food bank. The model informed French-Polynesia's 2020 coastal-fisheries code and deters commercial long-liners from licensing near the island. No confirmed tapu violations have occurred since 2014, suggesting moral-spiritual enforcement remains effective.

The Rapa Iti *rāhui* exemplifies successful locally managed marine areas (LMMAs) that contribute to global ocean conservation goals. While French Polynesia's waters are not subject to the same international frameworks as sovereign nations, this case demonstrates principles that align with SDG 14 targets, particularly SDG 14.2 (sustainable management of marine ecosystems), SDG 14.4 (ending destructive fishing practices), and SDG 14.B (providing access for small-scale artisanal fishers).

The *rāhui* system offers valuable lessons for achieving the 30×30 target of the Kunming-Montreal Global Biodiversity Framework, especially regarding effective protection through locally-appropriate governance models.

Implementation

The community established clear governance authority through traditional bodies recognized in municipal law, creating legitimate leadership for conservation decisions.

A specific marine closure system operates 363 days per year with boundaries that are both memorized culturally and documented with modern technology. Annual harvest rituals frame conservation within both indigenous and Christian spiritual practices, reinforcing community cohesion.

Harvesting follows collective rather than individual models, with equitable distribution based on household needs rather than fishing effort. Clear gear restrictions minimize harmful impacts, while enforcement combines community surveillance with spiritual beliefs about consequences for violations. Educational programs ensure knowledge transmission to younger generations, securing the system's future continuity.

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Key Lessons

The case studies presented in this report reveal the remarkable capacity of faith communities to advance marine conservation through approaches that harmonize spiritual values with environmental science. The following insights go beyond general principles to identify specific mechanisms that create measurable conservation success:

1. Ritual Innovation Accelerates Behavior Change:

The reimagining of existing religious rituals—not just general sacred framing—proves particularly effective at changing behavior. The Jewish Reverse Tashlich's transformation of a casting ritual into a removal practice generated measurable debris reduction (11 tonnes in 2024), while Rapa Iti's Protestant prayer-bounded fishing closures showed 70% higher hatching success than neighboring islands without such ritualized conservation.

2. Nested Authority Systems Outperform Single-Source Enforcement:

The most effective initiatives establish complementary layers of authority—religious, governmental, and traditional—rather than relying solely on religious endorsement. Zanzibar's Misali Island achieved 82% compliance by integrating Mufti declarations with government marine park designation and village-level enforcement, creating reinforcing accountability systems that single-authority approaches rarely attain.

3. Visible Measurement Creates Spiritual Motivation:

Faith-based approaches that incorporate tangible documentation of ecological impacts show stronger community persistence. Cambodia's Monks Community for Environment's underwater camera monitoring of dolphin populations connects abstract conservation concepts to observable results, motivating continued engagement when faith communities see concrete evidence of their spiritual commitment bearing fruit.





4. Micro-Enterprise Models Based on Religious Identity Provide Critical Income Alternatives:

Beyond generic sustainable livelihoods, initiatives that specifically leverage religious identity create distinctive economic alternatives. In India, Podampeta's Hindu turtle guardians' homestay program using their "Kurma-keeper" reputation increased earnings 32% compared to surrounding villages, demonstrating how conservation branded with spiritual identity creates unique market value.

5. Faith Institutions' Physical Infrastructure Creates Conservation Capacity:

The overlooked material assets of religious institutions—buildings, land, transportation—provide concrete operational advantages. A Rocha's network of 22 national organizations utilizes church properties for monitoring stations, temples in Donexay serve as education centers, and Catholic parish halls in Brazil function as fisher organizing spaces, creating permanent infrastructure for conservation that survives when project funding ends.

6. Institutional Continuity Transcends Political Cycles:

Religious institutions operate on timeframes that span generations, providing crucial stability to conservation efforts. The Ecumenical Patriarchate's three-decade ocean advocacy and Brazil's Pastoral da Pesca's fifty-year commitment demonstrate how faith organizations sustain marine protection through changing political landscapes and fluctuating funding environments. Unlike many conservation NGOs dependent on grant cycles, these religious structures maintain consistent presence in communities, allowing them to cultivate intergenerational knowledge transfer and ecological memory that proves invaluable during periods of political or economic disruption.

Multi-faith Declaration and the Path Forward

Based on the evidence gathered in this report, the following recommendations offer concrete pathways for enhancing faith-based contributions to ocean conservation ahead of UNOC3 and beyond.

These recommendations align with and complement the **UNOC3 Multi-faith Declaration**, a collaborative statement that articulates our shared spiritual commitment to ocean protection and provides a unified moral framework for action. The complete declaration is available at www.oceans.faith/declaration.

The Multi-faith Declaration emphasizes that “the ocean speaks to the heart of our spiritual traditions” and calls for transformative action in five key areas: protecting 30% of the ocean by 2030, supporting a moratorium on deep-sea mining, ratifying the High Seas Treaty, addressing marine pollution comprehensively, and recognizing the ocean’s vital role in regulating climate.

Strategic Pathways for Advancing Faith-Based Ocean Conservation

The case studies in this report demonstrate the unique effectiveness of faith-based marine conservation approaches. To build on these successes and scale their impact globally, several key pathways emerge:

1. For Faith Communities and Religious Leaders:

Faith communities can develop robust theological frameworks for ocean conservation by commissioning theological studies that examine marine protection through sacred texts, creating liturgies celebrating ocean biodiversity, and integrating conservation into religious education. Priority initiatives include:

- ◉ **Faith-Based Conservation Curriculum Development:**
Creating standardized but adaptable educational materials that connect marine conservation to diverse religious traditions
- ◉ **Clergy Training Programs:**
Developing workshops and certification programs that equip religious leaders with basic marine ecology knowledge and conservation advocacy skills
- ◉ **Religious Property Conservation Assessment:**
Conducting professional evaluations of faith-owned coastal properties for conservation potential and sustainable management

2. For Conservation Organizations and Marine Scientists:

Conservation organizations must develop deeper religious literacy and collaborative approaches when working with faith communities. Key opportunities include:

- ◉ **Faith-Science Partnership Accelerator:**
Creating structured programs that match scientific experts with religious institutions for collaborative marine conservation projects
- ◉ **Religious Context Training for Conservation Professionals:**
Implementing professional development programs that build cultural competence for engaging with diverse spiritual perspectives
- ◉ **Faith-Based Conservation Success Metrics:**
Developing evaluation frameworks that capture the unique social, cultural, and ecological impacts of faith-based conservation initiatives

3. For Policymakers and Governments:

Governments should create formal channels for religious engagement in marine policy development and implementation. Promising approaches include:

- ◉ **Faith-Inclusive Marine Policy Fellowship Program:**
Establishing positions for religious representatives within government agencies responsible for ocean governance
- ◉ **Sacred Marine Site Recognition Initiative:**
Supporting efforts to document and formally recognize traditionally protected marine areas with religious significance
- ◉ **Religious Institution Conservation Grant Program:**
Creating dedicated funding streams that specifically support faith-led marine conservation projects

4. For the UN Ocean Conference and International Bodies:

International bodies should systematically integrate faith perspectives into ocean governance frameworks. Important mechanisms include:

- ◉ **Interfaith Ocean Advisory Body:**
Establishing a formal multifaith council that provides guidance on integrating spiritual values into international ocean policy

- ◉ **Faith Delegate Sponsorship Program:**

Ensuring participation of religious leaders in key international ocean conferences and negotiations

- ◉ **Faith-Led Ocean Initiative Database:**

Creating a comprehensive, searchable repository of successful faith-based marine conservation projects to facilitate knowledge sharing and replication

Catalyzing Collaborative Action

To maximize impact, several cross-sectoral initiatives could transform the scale and effectiveness of faith-based marine conservation:

- **Global Faith and Ocean Alliance:**

A formal network of religious institutions, conservation organizations, scientific bodies, and policy stakeholders dedicated to advancing the role of faith communities in achieving ocean conservation targets

- **Faith-Based Conservation Finance Mechanism:**

A dedicated funding instrument that supports faith-led marine initiatives with proven effectiveness metrics

- **Religious Ocean Leadership Academy:**

A high-profile training program that equips promising religious leaders from vulnerable coastal regions with the knowledge, skills, and connections to become influential ocean conservation advocates

- **Faith Ocean Conservation Technology Hub:**

A collaborative platform that helps religious institutions adopt and adapt appropriate technologies for monitoring marine ecosystems and documenting conservation impacts

The case studies in this report demonstrate the extraordinary potential of faith communities as marine conservation partners. By investing in these pathways, we can catalyze a transformative movement that harnesses the moral authority, community reach, institutional permanence, and spiritual motivation of the world's religious traditions to protect our shared ocean home.

Conclusion: A Moral Call for Ocean Action

As the global community prepares for the Third UN Ocean Conference, engaging faith communities as partners in marine conservation represents one of our most promising strategies for achieving the scale, speed, and sustainability of action needed to protect our shared blue planet.

Faith-based approaches transform conservation from external obligation to spiritual practice, creating solutions with authenticity and legitimacy that purely technical interventions rarely achieve. By integrating moral authority, institutional permanence, global reach, and cultural resonance, religious communities offer unique capabilities that complement and enhance conventional conservation strategies.

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