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# Editorial: Challenges and opportunities in regional governance of ocean ecosystems

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## Editorial on the Research Topic

Challenges and opportunities in regional governance of ocean ecosystems

It has become increasingly clear that the regional and sub-regional levels are critical components of multilevel ocean governance spanning local to global levels. Recently, the 2030 agenda and SDG 14 have further focused attention on the importance of regional initiatives. Yet our understanding of what is in place for ocean governance in the many marine regions that comprise the global oceans is in the early stages. The transboundary arrangements that cover issues relating to sustainable use of ocean ecosystems, their effectiveness, the interactions among them, the roles of the various actors that comprise them and how they relate to the local, national and global levels below and above are all areas that require concerted effort for improved understanding and sharing of lessons learned. In this Research Topic we have sought to explore these topics in greater detail with the aim of furthering our understanding and pointing the way to the research that is needed to make overall global ocean governance more effective. Several papers use examples from the different regional ocean areas while others explore crosscutting topics. Connections between regional governance and Areas Beyond National Jurisdiction (ABNJ) are also explored.

Focusing on the interplay between national and regional ocean policies, [Hills et al.](#) examined the extent to which ocean governance has evolved in the Solomon Islands from 1999-2018, given the potential synergies between national efforts for an integrated National Ocean Policy (NOP) and regional level policy development. Despite some overlapping, the authors concluded the effect of the NOP is one of repetition and consolidation rather than extending or evolving ocean policy in the Solomon Islands.

For the Eastern Tropical Pacific [Enright et al.](#) explain how, in the absence of a coherent, overarching regional ocean governance framework, four coastal States (Ecuador, Costa Rica, Colombia, and Panama) came together to create a regional cooperation

mechanism for the conservation and sustainable use of marine biodiversity. They reflect on challenges encountered and on the implications of the new Biodiversity Beyond National Jurisdiction (BBNJ) Agreement for the mechanism. In the Southeast Atlantic [Naidoo et al.](#) build on a substantial body of knowledge and experience in the Benguela Current Large Marine Ecosystem (LME) to explore the extent to which governance there can be considered to be polycentric. Their multilevel approach encompasses both national and regional levels and examines further opportunities for polycentric governance mechanisms in that area. In the Wider Caribbean Region (WCR) [Fanning et al.](#) draw on more than two decades of effort to implement regional ocean governance supported by the Global Environment Facility (GEF) to elucidate key challenges. These include limited financial resources along with capacity, leadership and political support at the country level, impacting meaningful engagement with regional level processes. The authors found these barriers to be persistent throughout the period examined, reaffirming the long-term commitment needed from GEF if the benefits expected by participating countries are to be achieved. Also in the WCR [Mahon and Fanning](#) focus on the science-policy interactions influencing regional ocean governance. Given most countries in the region are small with limited science capacity, the authors flagged the need to address science-policy interactions explicitly and to foster boundary spanning activities that connect providers and consumers of scientific knowledge.

Moving away from specific national and regional examples, [Adewumi](#) examined different ocean policy domains within an African context, using previously published criteria to explain relationships influenced by the context and concerns arising in the regional-global nexus. The author's assessment reiterates the importance of healthy regional-global governance relations as a way to ensure the sustainability of the ocean and the ecosystem services it provides. At the programmatic level [Degger et al.](#) evaluate the GEF efforts to promote regional ocean governance through the LME approach and its associated Transboundary Diagnostic Analysis and Strategic Action Planning (TDA-SAP) processes. They identify lessons learned across several different regions.

At the level of ABNJ [Gjerde and Yadav](#) consider the implications of polycentricity for effective governance. They outline critical needs for effective governance of ABNJ overall, but also specifically for the enhancement of regional capacity to engage with governance of ABNJ. Still within ABNJ [Freestone](#) examines the challenges encountered with establishing a High Seas protected area for the Sargasso Sea. He emphasizes the complexity of this endeavor and highlights the role that adjacent countries can play in High Seas conservation.

The Marine Regions Forum, a global level initiative to promote regional ocean governance is evaluated by [Weiand et al.](#) The Forum was designed specifically as an inclusive dialogue and exchange platform for diverse actors from marine regions that provided an informal space for joint learning and for supporting regional action

and international governance processes alike. This paper concludes by discussing the value added of transparent and inclusive collaborative processes in the transformation of ocean governance toward achieving sustainability.

[Christiansen et al.](#) elaborate on options for stronger governance integration and the development of a coherent and collaborative interplay between the International Seabed Authority (ISA) and the BBNJ Agreement. They explore the potential of Regional Environmental Management Plans (REMPs) established by the ISA to contribute to global biodiversity conservation, and the opportunity for the proposed BBNJ Instrument to promote overarching coherence to biodiversity conservation in ABNJ, premised on an ecosystem approach to management. They conclude that the proposed BBNJ Instrument could have a pivotal role to streamline multilateral action for the conservation of biodiversity in ABNJ by adopting an ambitious, overarching environmental vision and strategic goals.

In closing we note that the range of topics that must be addressed in order to better understand the role of regional ocean governance in sustainable use of the global ocean is well reflected in the background papers for [Interactive Dialogues](#) of the 2022 UN Ocean Conference. This indicates that ideas of multilevel governance and the importance of the regional level in achieving SDG14 and other ocean related SGDs are being mainstreamed into conceptualizing and planning for sustainable use of the oceans. The [Conference Declaration](#) underscores that view. In that context, the papers in this Research Topic take on particular value in illustrating the kind of research needed to support regional approaches to ocean governance and their interaction with global to local levels.

## Author contributions

All authors listed have made a substantial, direct, and intellectual contribution to the work and approved it for publication.

## Conflict of interest

The authors declare that the research was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.

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