

Ocean Diplomacy at the Third UN Ocean Conference

Written by Martin Duffy

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MARTIN DUFFY, JUN 18 2025

Few international observers expected much from the 3rd United Nations Ocean Conference (UNOC3) which closed in Nice on 13 June 2025. This was probably just as well as so many other ocean and climate initiatives have come and gone in past decades. In the eyes of ocean experts and the NGO community, the collective achievements have been paltry. Ireland is among the countries most vocal in their scepticism. This is in contrast to the results claimed by member states and perhaps even by the UN itself from the slivers of achievement squeezed from hours of tense negotiation.

Perhaps the greatest, unequivocal accomplishment of this solid week of hot-house talks, is that there will follow both more talks and (graduated) but effective action with statistical indices for monitoring results. Recalling the quip that 90% of success is merely turning up, Secretary-General Guterres and his team got the conference across the finish line. Most professional analysts might say that, based on past performance, this is likely as good as it gets. Admittedly that is modest comfort to islands questioning whether they will even be around in a half-century.

I spoke with the UN's NGO liaison desk which has the difficult task of managing the participation of hundreds of oceanographic NGOs at the conference, and (more problematically) their frustrations and inevitable dissatisfaction. These summits are powder-kegs of potential explosion between the UN, member-states and NGOs. Yet, the UN summary was predictably positive:

Five agenda-packed days of high-level meetings between governments, experts, climate campaigners and community representatives...15,000 delegates...more than 60 heads of state... At Summit conclusion there was a definite outcome- more than 170 countries adopted a political declaration (Nice Ocean Action Plan), committing to urgent action on conserving and sustainably using the world's ocean. In addition, the main goals of the declaration include expanding marine protection areas, limiting marine pollution and increasing financial aid for coastal and island nations, are all supported by costed action-plans.

However, oceanographic NGOs are quick to explain that realities invariably lie in the detail. The general public, for their part, are perfectly at liberty to probe the tangible outcomes of the UN Ocean Conference. As is usual in the wake of all these major summits, whatever their field, no-one can hope to see results for quite some time. However, if there is a gleam of light from Nice it is surely that the resulting political declaration (unusually) says quite a bit about diplomatic and legal enforceability.

The key accomplishment is that enough countries either ratified or formally committed to ratifying the high seas treaty. Once ratified, this agreement will help achieve an agreed global target of protecting 30% of the world's seas by 2030. It will provide the first legal mechanism for the creation of protected areas in the high seas, international waters that cover almost two-thirds of the ocean. This pathway has some mechanisms of enforcement. If these are exercised and the responsible bodies are less than paper tigers, then enforcement may follow.

Speaking at the closing press conference, Li Jinhua, UN Under-Secretary-General for Economic and Social Affairs and UNOC3 Secretary-General, said the pledges made at Nice "must be rigorously implemented, tracked, and scaled". I attended the USG's informal briefing where it was put to him that his pledges were "highly aspirational" and predictably Mr Jinhua was quick to put the best possible spin on the token promises that a week in Nice had

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delivered. When I spoke to the UNOC3 Press Office their spokesperson was a little more forthcoming on the details of how such a political declaration could be achieved:

More than 800 new voluntary commitments were made (including) the EU Ocean Pact – a €1bn commitment to protect marine life and strengthening the blue economy – and French Polynesia's commitment to create the world's largest marine protected area. UNSG Guterres emphasized our last-chance-saloon for action on ocean diplomacy. No-one can remain less than alert to the facts that the follow-up actions of member states are absolutely crucial.

There were also substantial examples of national, bi-lateral and multi-national action. Principal among these, the 'High Ambition Coalition for a Quiet Ocean', of 37 countries, co-led by Canada and Panama and which includes Ireland, was also launched at UNOC3 to campaign for a reduction in underwater noise pollution. Germany has launched a €100m action plan to clear World War II-era munitions in the Baltic Sea and North Sea, while, Indonesia and the World Bank launched a 'Coral Bond', a new financial instrument to raise private capital to conserve coral reef ecosystems in Indonesia's marine protected zones.

The implicit objective of UNOC3 was to encourage countries to ratify the High Seas Treaty. This aims to curb overfishing and safeguard marine ecosystems. An impressive total of nineteen countries ratified the treaty during UNOC3, bringing the total number of ratifications to 50. When I asked the UNOC3 desk they admitted there was more to be done. But here we are into the enforcement and implementing stressors which the UN has put at the conclusion of Nice. The goal of support is still way far off what is necessary for implementation. In fact, at least sixty ratifications are required in order for the treaty to come into force at UN level.

There were colourful moments too such as the NGO Ocean Rebellion dressed in costumes mocking a blind-folded French President Emmanuel Macron lampooned as strolling along the 'Promenade des Anglaise'. Host countries for international summits are invariably the most defensive about goals. Thus, Olivier Poivre D'Arvor, French special envoy at UNOC3, said, "what was decided in Nice cannot be undone. No illegal path is acceptable". It was clear that the NGO community felt that Macron was blind to the obstacles of the Nice Summit. I spoke to the press desk for Ocean Rebellion and received, as expected, a much more scathing appraisal:

A week of pomp and ceremony in Nice and once again pitifully little if anything actually achieved. It is the double-speak of diplomacy. They say progress- we see this as retrospection as the deterioration is happening at such a depressing speed that we cannot afford to stand still for a moment. They say commitments- well where are the hard facts of who has actually signed up to anything which is legally enforceable? We say that Macron and his friends are blind to what is happening to the oceans but that of course forgets that he is just happily choosing not to save the ocean.

Some 95 countries also supported a French initiative to limit plastic production and consumption, ahead of the next round of talks in Geneva in August which hopes to achieve a global plastics treaty. But probably the biggest failing was that USA sent no high-ranking delegation. This was hardly surprising given Donald Trump's fast-tracking of deep-sea mining licences in US and international waters, dredging the seafloor with a pump to extract metals and minerals. The USA delegation in Nice were understandably less than vocal and pretty invisible. Perhaps it is actually another minor achievement that an all-out diplomatic spat between America and the USA was averted at Nice.

UNSG Antonio Guterres, specifically referenced deep sea mining, "the deep sea cannot become the Wild West". The USA experts pretty much took that direct criticism of President Trump without protest. More generally, the Nice Summit underlies the formidable extent to which the current US administration is at odds with almost the entirety of global government on protecting the world's oceans.

As Karen McVeigh said in The Guardian "there was momentum' and enthusiasm (and) critical voices too." Carrying Jacques Cousteau's legacy "The sea... man's only hope ..." David Attenborough with his acclaimed new film, Ocean, demonstrated its fate along with the deterioration of 70% of the Earth's surface. UNSG Guterres called the pace of progress "a record". "Nice was not a victory but the UN's progress must surely be measured against the other depressing crises in the world. There was a touching symbolism in Ludovic Burns Tuki blowing a pu, a traditional

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conch shell “with the support of our ancestors.” In Polynesian navigation, the conch is sounded to signal peaceful intent.

Co-sponsor, Arnoldo André-Tinoco, Foreign Minister of Costa Rica, urged other nations to accelerate financing for ocean protection. “Each commitment must be held accountable,” he said at the conference’s closing meeting. But the concluding note must surely be that all that potential momentum – carries a crucial acid-test of follow-up. For Peter Thomson, the UN’s Special Envoy for the Ocean, Nice marked a turning point. “It’s not so much what happens at the conference, it is what happens afterwards,” recalling the early days of ocean advocacy when the UN’s Sustainable Development Goal 14 (SDG14), on life below water, was first agreed. Nice was a step forward but hardly a victory for ocean diplomacy.

About the author:

Martin Duffy has participated in more than two hundred international election and human rights assignments since beginning his career in Africa and Asia in the 1980s. He has served with a wide range of international organizations and has frequently been decorated for field service, among them UN (United Nations) Peacekeeping Citations and the Badge of Honour of the International Red Cross Movement. He has also held several academic positions in Ireland, UK, USA and elsewhere. He is a proponent of experiential learning. He holds awards from Dublin, Oxford, Harvard, and several other institutions including the Diploma in International Relations at the University of Cambridge.