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A call to action to support and safeguard ocean defenders

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Coastal communities worldwide face growing environmental and human rights burdens from the expanding ocean economy. Yet ocean defenders who mobilize to defend the marine environment, their territories, and their rights often experience repression, intimidation, and violence. Society has a moral and legal duty to protect human rights and ocean defenders. Governments, the private sector, civil society organizations, funders, human rights institutions, and the international ocean governance community must mobilize urgently to support and safeguard ocean defenders.

Around the world, coastal populations and communities are being burdened by the exponential growth and inadequate regulation of the ocean economy - which can threaten the marine environment and resources on which people depend, the integrity of their marine and coastal territories, and their human rights^{1–3}. Understandably, local people organize and mobilize in opposition to these threatening development activities, becoming environmental defenders, human

rights defenders, or ‘ocean defenders’^{1,4–6}. Ocean defenders are the individuals, groups and collectives who advocate for the protection of the marine environment and the rights of their communities in the face of existential threats using various forms of public protest⁷. Social mobilizations of ocean defenders are essential catalysts for a sustainable ocean and marine conservation^{2,7–11}. Yet there is growing evidence that, when they speak out, ocean defenders are experiencing

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diverse forms of repression, intimidation, and persecution, as well as non-lethal and lethal attacks^{1,11}.

Society has an urgent moral duty and a legal responsibility under international law to protect the rights and lives of ocean defenders^{1,5,12,13}. This perspective issues an urgent call to action to all sectors of society - governments, the private sector, and civil society - to support and safeguard ocean defenders globally.

Human rights, the ocean economy, and the plight of defenders

All people have inherent human rights under international law^{14–16}. Human rights include substantive rights such as the right to health, food, housing, work, an adequate standard of living, security and life, as well as the right to a clean, healthy and sustainable environment^{14–18}. They also include procedural rights such as the right to: safely gather, organize and express oneself; be informed and participate in decision-making related to the environment; peacefully protest in defense of human rights and the human right to a healthy environment; and, be able to access justice and effective remedies when rights are transgressed^{5,7,12,19–21}. Women, children, and other groups subject to discrimination have specific and unique rights that ensure their substantive and procedural equality^{22–25}. Indigenous Peoples and other traditional communities, including small-scale fishers, hold distinct and differentiated rights - including tenure and access rights, and the right to Free, Prior and Informed Consent (FPIC) - reflecting their historical connection to and ongoing direct reliance on resources and territories for livelihoods, food security, and cultural continuity^{26–30}. All members and sectors of society - governments, businesses, and civil society - have responsibilities and obligations with regard to promoting, respecting, and protecting the full set of human rights^{1,7,13,31,32}. Further, all human rights exist and related responsibilities apply in the context of the ocean, from coastal margins to the high seas in areas beyond national jurisdiction^{1,18,32,33}.

Yet, declines in ocean health and rapid growth of the ocean economy are adversely impacting the human rights of ocean-dependent populations^{1,32}. A healthy, abundant, and non-toxic ocean provides critical benefits to humanity that underpin fundamental human rights - such as the right to food, to a reasonable standard of living, and to health^{1,32}. This is particularly true for coastal communities and small-scale fishers, many of whom may also be Indigenous Peoples, who rely on the ocean for subsistence, livelihoods, and culture^{34–36}. Globally, the triple planetary crisis of biodiversity loss, climate change, and marine pollution are all impacting the human rights of coastal populations to a healthy ocean^{37–39}. At the same time, increasing investments in the ocean economy - which includes sectors such as offshore oil and gas, fisheries and aquaculture, shipping and port development, marine tourism, and bioprospecting - is leading to rapid growth, expansion into new areas and depths of the ocean, and the harnessing of new technologies to extract resources still untouched^{40–44}.

While ocean development initiatives can potentially generate economic opportunities, such efforts must be pursued in ways that fully uphold internationally recognized human rights standards. In many places, unchecked expansion and inadequate governance of the ocean economy is violating human rights - for example, through: (a) overharvesting and impacting the sustainability of fish and other marine resources, thus undermining substantive rights to sufficient food and secure livelihoods; (b) producing marine pollution that undermines local rights to a non-toxic environment, which can further affect fish and seafood, thereby compromising rights to safe food and health; (c) generating disproportionate burdens on groups who are more reliant on marine resources (e.g., small-scale fishers, Indigenous Peoples) or more vulnerable to the effects of environmental declines and pollution (e.g., women, children), thus undermining these groups rights to adequate food and health; (d) encroaching on and displacing Indigenous Peoples, small-scale fishers, and coastal communities from territories where they live and work, thus undermining their tenure and access rights; (e) indirectly affecting cultural rights through the disruption of social relations and cultural connections to the ocean; and (f) directly impacting rights to security through violent confrontations and

dispossession^{1–3,45–49}. These impacts on substantive human rights are often underpinned by violations of procedural rights when coastal rightsholders and stakeholders are not provided with sufficient information in advance, excluded or inadequately included in decision-making, and not provided with an opportunity to provide free, prior and informed consent^{1,7,32}.

In the face of these mounting pressures, individuals, groups (including small-scale fishers, Indigenous Peoples, women and youth), coastal communities, and broader networks are actively organizing, mobilizing, speaking out and protesting *against* threatening activities of the ocean economy and *for* the marine environment and human rights^{1,7,10,11,50}. These ‘ocean defenders’ are mobilizing all over the world across high and low development contexts^{1,10,11}. For example, ocean defenders are struggling against: offshore oil and gas in Argentina, Peru, Ghana and South Africa; large-scale industrial fisheries in Cameroon, Senegal and Turkey; industrial aquaculture development in Chile and India; and, the impending threat of deep-sea mining in Papua New Guinea and elsewhere in Oceania^{1,10,11,51}. Simultaneously, these groups are struggling in order to put forward their own alternative visions for the ocean, forms of economic development, and their lives. Small-scale fishers, for instance, often foreground demands for secure tenure and access to fishing territories, secure livelihoods, food sovereignty, cultural continuity, occupational health, social protection, gender protections, inclusive economies, and participatory governance - considerations that are often sidelined in mainstream ocean economy development^{2,3,46,47,49,50,52}. Defenders use diverse strategies, such as documenting key issues, communication campaigns, corporate activism, legal and policy interventions, as well as protests and demonstrations, to fight against different sectors of the ocean economy⁷. Broader movements of ocean defenders, such as those led by fishers’ organizations, can also support local defenders through fostering solidarity networks, building capacity for community-based monitoring and documenting evidence (e.g., through participatory mapping), and facilitating people’s tribunals at national and regional scales to amplify testimonies about the effects of the ocean economy^{11,46,47}.

However, there is also a growing body of evidence that ocean defenders are experiencing repression and attacks. This includes systematic efforts by governments and private sector actors to marginalize and silence, stigmatize and surveil, criminalize and arbitrarily arrest, and intimidate and threaten ocean defenders and those close to them^{1,7,10,11}. Narratives of violent non-lethal and lethal attacks are widespread^{1,7,11}. Yet the true scope and scale of the risks facing ocean defenders is still unknown due to insufficient reporting and documentation in many countries and global monitoring initiatives. As the ocean economy expands to meet growing global demand for resources^{3,40}, there is a substantial risk that these types of issues will increase - made worse by worrying and dangerous trends of shrinking civic space and declining environmental democracy that is occurring around the world^{19,53–58}. In many geographies - particularly in parts of Latin America, Southeast Asia and West Africa - organized criminal networks linked to illegal fishing, narcotics, trafficking, mining, and other illicit economies also pose severe threats to ocean defenders, ranging from intimidation to assassination^{7,59–62}.

These egregious violations of the human rights of ocean defenders must not be allowed to continue. Ocean defenders play an important role in advocating for a sustainable ocean and protecting human rights, and they should be recognized as both environmental defenders and human rights defenders^{1,4–6}. Furthermore, ocean defenders should be supported, safeguarded, and celebrated in their efforts to protect the ocean environment and human rights^{1,5,6,12,19,20,63,64}. While there has been growing attention to the plight of terrestrial and freshwater environmental defenders in recent years^{12,53,56,65–67}, defenders of marine and coastal environments are often neglected from policy dialogues and documents, efforts to document lethal and non-lethal attacks, and initiatives by civil society to support defenders^{7,11}. In short, there is insufficient attention to the plight of ocean defenders, as well as inadequate support for their efforts and safety.

An urgent call to action for all sectors of society

Recognizing the global, widespread, and urgent nature of this problem, we therefore issue a call to action to support and safeguard ocean defenders. We



Fig. 1 | An urgent call to action to support and safeguard ocean defenders. A call to action to states and governments, the private sector, allied organizations, ocean funders, human rights institutions, and the ocean governance community to support and safeguard ocean defenders

are a global group of more than 100 researchers, practitioners and ocean defenders who work and care deeply for the health of the ocean and the rights of people. This call to action was initially drafted based on insights from collaborative and empirical research conducted under The Ocean Defenders Project^{7,11,58}, and further developed and refined based on a workshop and side event at the United Nations Ocean Conference in Nice, France in June 2025 that included both ocean defenders and allies. This call to action appeals to governments, the private sector, allied organizations, ocean funders, human rights institutions, and the international ocean governance community (Fig. 1) - while acknowledging first and foremost that ocean defenders must be at the forefront of discussions about how to protect the ocean, respect their territories and rights, and ensure that they are safe and supported^{11,12,66}.

1. We call on **states and governments** at all levels to enact their obligations to respect, protect and fulfill human rights in the context of the ocean, to maintain open and safe civic spaces, and to support and safeguard ocean defenders. Governments at all levels must promote science and evidence-based sustainable management and conservation measures to protect the marine environment and associated human rights^{1,13,32}. Governments should also ensure all ocean governance and planning processes are grounded in a recognition of human rights, including the right to a healthy ocean, and underpinned by meaningful participation in decision-making, access to information, access to justice in the form of accessible and effective judicial and non-judicial mechanisms, and effective remedies when rights are violated^{11,20,21,32}. The distinct rights of Indigenous Peoples and small-scale fishers, including customary tenure and resource access rights, should be recognized by governments in ocean policy frameworks, as well as respected and protected during marine planning processes and development of ocean economy initiatives^{26,27,28,68}. Governments must uphold rights to peaceful assembly, protest and free expression, in this case regarding the ocean environment and human rights, and strengthen legal and policy frameworks to explicitly recognize and protect environmental and ocean defenders from repression, threats, and attacks^{1,7,69}. Finally, governments have a responsibility to foster the knowledge and build the capacity of businesses and civil society to comply with relevant laws and human rights obligations, including the responsibility to protect ocean defenders, and to establish corporate accountability mechanisms and mandatory human rights due

diligence requirements for all ocean economy sectors, with grievance channels, enforcement mechanisms and penalties for non-compliance.

2. We call on the **private sector**, in particular business and financial institutions involved in the ocean economy, to respect and uphold the human rights of coastal communities and ocean defenders. Businesses in the ocean economy have a responsibility to comply with environmental regulations that aim to prevent pollution, environmental degradation and biodiversity loss, and other harms that undermine human rights to a healthy ocean^{1,32}. Private companies must prevent, mitigate, and remedy human rights violations, including through implementing a human rights policy and integrating mandatory environmental and human rights due diligence into their operations and supply chains, with particular attention to risks facing coastal communities and ocean defenders^{13,31}. This requires that businesses take proactive measures to prevent human rights violations, including conducting proactive and rigorous social and environmental impact assessments, transparently communicating results regarding potential impacts on the marine environment and human rights, actively engaging with affected communities, and ensuring that FPIC is granted and documented^{1,31}. FPIC must be treated not as a procedural formality but as a substantive safeguard, requiring culturally appropriate engagement, independent facilitation where necessary, and transparent documentation of consent processes during marine planning and ocean development processes. The private sector should also establish clear policies and mechanisms to avoid complicity in suppression, intimidation, threats, and violence committed against ocean defenders, as well as whistleblower protections and zero tolerance policies for retaliation⁷. Businesses and financial institutions must provide confidential, accessible, and safe grievance mechanisms for reporting violations and misconduct, and hold subsidiaries and partners across the supply chain accountable for abuses including through divesting when businesses are found to be violating human rights³¹. Remedial action by the private sector should swiftly follow when human rights violations have occurred.
3. We call on **allied organizations**, including civil society networks, non-governmental organizations, academic institutions, the media and legal organizations, that work with coastal communities to commit and take actions to support and safeguard ocean defenders. Ocean defenders often operate in challenging governance and high-risk

contexts, with limited resources and little legal protection and visibility from the wider society⁵³. Thus, they can benefit from context-specific support to continue their critical work protecting and advocating for the ocean environment, defending community rights, and resisting harmful impacts of ocean economy ventures. Allied organizations can play a vital role through amplifying the voices and stories of ocean defenders, researching and documenting issues, providing legal services and education on rights, building organizational capacity and fundraising, safely reporting threats, enhancing security, fostering safe spaces for mutual learning and collaboration, advocating for safer and more inclusive civic spaces, and supporting due diligence and accountability measures⁵⁸. Potential allied organizations can include grassroots civil society networks, non-governmental organizations, legal non-profits, academic institutions, and the media⁵⁸. Organizations already working with coastal communities on marine conservation, sustainable fisheries, and social development projects have a particular responsibility to integrate human rights into their own operations, embrace human rights-based approaches in their initiatives, and to step up when novel threats from the ocean economy or risks to local defenders arise. Civil society organizations should therefore develop concrete protocols and build internal capacity on how to respond when ocean defenders face human rights issues or repression. Researchers - including those who work in academia, media organizations, legal non-profits, and NGOs - can play an important role by identifying threats to the marine environment and risks to human rights associated with ocean development and exclusionary conservation activities. They can also help to document non-lethal and lethal attacks, facilitate sharing and learning from case studies, systematically assess and identify effective mobilization and advocacy strategies, and analyze the structural and institutional drivers of issues facing ocean defenders^{11,70}. At a higher level, allied organizations can further contribute by facilitating the access, capacity and participation of ocean defenders in national and international ocean governance forums to ensure they have a “seat at the table” and encouraging states and private sector actors to adopt human rights in ocean governance and business practices, and to meet their obligations and responsibilities. There is also a critical need for international or regional mechanisms to support coordinated proactive and rapid reactive responses to assist ocean defenders when issues arise. Importantly, all efforts by allied organizations to support ocean defenders must be done in solidarity with and guided by ocean defenders themselves.

4. We call on **ocean funders** to recognize the critical role of ocean defenders and ensure long-term, core and flexible financial support to both ocean defenders and the allied organizations that work alongside them. Ocean defenders often need direct funding to support their organizations, advocacy efforts, and security needs⁵⁸. The allied organizations that support them also require sustained core funding that aligns with their missions, while also allowing the flexibility to respond adequately and rapidly to the diverse and evolving needs of coastal communities⁵⁸. Current funding structures are often too limited, short-term or restrictive to adequately address the human rights challenges ocean defenders face. Ocean funders - philanthropic and multilateral donors who financially invest in marine and coastal sustainability efforts - must therefore recognize the urgency of supporting work to address human rights issues in the ocean economy, including work to proactively advance and protect the human right to a healthy ocean, and invest more substantially in ocean defenders and organizations and long-term initiatives that safeguard defenders. This includes expanding support for critical activities (such as legal support and rapid response mechanisms) as well as underfunded but impactful activities (such as peer learning exchanges and community-based networking) which build resilience and solidarity even when their outcomes are not immediately measurable^{8,9,58,66}. Funding models and mechanisms that are flexible are needed that allow community-led and informal

organizations to access funding to meet locally defined priorities, respond rapidly to emerging threats, and reduce administrative burdens that can otherwise constrain frontline human rights work. Core operational support, for activities such as organizational governance, financial management and compliance, is critical to enable access to direct funding. Funders should also have their own safeguards and due diligence measures in place to ensure organizations and activities they support financially do not contribute to or exacerbate human rights issues.

5. We call on **national and international human rights institutions** to play an active role in protecting the human rights of coastal communities, and to explicitly recognize and focus on safeguarding ocean defenders as environmental human rights defenders. National Human Rights Institutions (NHRIs) are key allies due to their legal mandate to uphold human rights⁵⁸. Yet NHRIs often face financial limitations, political interference, and may lack the expertise needed to address issues in coastal and marine environments. Strengthening the independence and capacity of NHRIs to engage with human rights issues related to the ocean is essential, which could be accomplished through having dedicated ocean and human rights focal points. International human rights bodies can provide support to NHRIs and help bring visibility to ocean-related human rights violations - especially when national governments are unwilling or unable to respond. Human rights institutions at both national and international levels can help to establish safe reporting and rapid response mechanisms, enhance whistleblower protections, address systemic barriers such as corruption and discrimination, and ensure that human rights obligations are fully integrated into ocean governance frameworks at all levels⁷. Potential legal services that NHRIs can provide include fielding complaints, offering advice, providing pro-bono litigation, and intervening in court cases on behalf of ocean defenders. Crucially, ocean defenders should be explicitly recognized in all work on environmental defenders and human rights defenders by human rights institutions, to ensure their unique struggles and contributions are not overlooked.
6. We call on the **international ocean governance community** to recognize human rights and the need to protect ocean defenders in ocean governance deliberations, documents, laws and policies. A sustainable ocean requires that human rights are respected, protected and fulfilled^{1,64,71}. International ocean governance deliberations (e.g., related to regional fisheries management, maritime transport and shipping, deep-sea mining, or conservation and sustainable use of biodiversity in areas beyond national jurisdiction), agreements and policy documents must therefore explicitly recognize human rights law, commitments and requirements. All national laws and policies related to development of the ocean economy should call out human rights law and embed a human rights-based approach, which is based on international human rights standards and aims to promote and protect all civil, political, social, cultural and economic rights, the distinct rights of different groups, as well as the right to a healthy ocean^{72,73}. Particular attention must be given to procedural equity, ensuring that marginalized groups, including Indigenous Peoples, small-scale fishers, women and youth, are not only consulted but able to influence the outcomes of ocean governance. Multilateral and national ocean governance forums, treaty processes and policy frameworks should also explicitly recognize the important role that ocean defenders (including Indigenous Peoples, small-scale fishers, women, and youth from coastal communities) play in protecting the ocean environment and human rights, and the critical need to safeguard these environmental and human rights defenders from repression, marginalization, criminalization, stigmatization, threats, attacks and murders. A sustainable and equitable ocean economy requires that ocean defenders are not only safe but meaningfully empowered to help shape the future of ocean governance - including through participating in national and international policy events, negotiations, and

deliberations, which may necessitate financing, capacity building, and other accessibility measures.

Conclusion

This perspective highlights it is indispensable to secure the rights and territories, support the self-empowerment, and ensure the safety of ocean defenders worldwide, as an essential and tangible step toward protection of the ocean environment and the respect, protection, and fulfillment of coastal communities' human rights. All sectors of society - governments, the private sector, and civil society - have obligations and responsibilities and a role in maintaining open civic spaces and ensuring the safety of environmental human rights defenders who speak on behalf of the ocean, their territories, and their human rights. As the ocean economy expands and democratic institutions decline, the risks to ocean defenders will likely rise and these responsibilities will press even harder. Failure to act will result in continued repression and silencing of critical voices for a just and sustainable ocean. Proactive attention to the protection of human rights and ocean defenders will support the achievement of global goals for the ocean and sustainable development.

This call to action seeks to alert the global ocean community of practitioners and decision-makers to the need to remember, recognize, and factor in human rights and ocean defenders during dialogues and deliberations related to ocean governance and the ocean economy. This includes international conferences where these topics are discussed informally (e.g., United Nations Ocean Conferences, Economist World Ocean Summits, and Our Ocean Conferences) and formal international governance processes where binding decisions are negotiated, regulated or adjudicated (e.g., UN Convention on the Law of the Sea, World Trade Organization, International Maritime Organization, International Seabed Authority, Regional Seas Conventions, International Tribunal for the Law of the Sea). If these forums advance ocean governance and the ocean economy without institutionalizing human rights protections and safeguards for environmental defenders, they risk reinforcing the very activities and pressures that put ocean defenders at risk. Ocean defenders must be at the forefront of discussions regarding the ocean at local, national and global scales to ensure their voices are heard and their rights are respected, protected, and fulfilled.

Data availability

No datasets were generated or analysed during the current study.

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Competing interests

The authors declare no competing interests

Additional information

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