

UNOC 2022 Lisbon, Portugal

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“Every second breath you take, comes from the Ocean”

I swear I heard that at least four times a day in Portugal. At the beginning of every panel, plenary, celebrity appearance and conference talk. I suppose the Ocean is kind of a big deal. So big in fact, it covers 70% of the planet, maintains our climate and ecosystems, feeds the world, inspires cultures, and now has a whole decade and global movement dedicated to its protection, research, and restoration.

Let's set the scene.

The current decade 2021–2030 has been declared the “Decade of sustainable development” by the United Nations General Assembly. Within this decade the United Nations proposed and adopted 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) designed to guide future developments and intended to be achieved by 2030. By creating SDG 14, Life Under Water, the UN has brought global attention to the importance of the Ocean as a key pillar underpinning our society. Using SDG 14 as a platform, the UN and UNESCO has proposed this decade to also be the “Decade of Ocean Sciences” with the addition of 7 ocean outcomes, in which to strive toward. Alongside this, UNESCO has endorsed the creation of the UN ECOP Programme, to support and provide opportunity to Early Career Ocean Professionals.

In short, there is a lot of buzz about the Oceans, where we are heading as a global society, and what needs to be done to safeguard the future of life on Planet Earth.

No pressure.

In June/July 2022 I had the opportunity to attend the United Nations Ocean Conference (UNOC) in Lisbon Portugal. My place there was supported by the Centre for Marine Socioecology and the Early Career Ocean Professional Programme (ECOP).

I have been engaged with the decade and the ECOP programme since 2019, so the opportunity to see the real thing in action was not to be missed! The following is a series of reflections on the conference; the good, the bad and hopefully, a guide to navigating a massive conference such as UNOC.



Figure 1: Love this image? I certainly didn't take it but the Ocean Agency in partnership with the Ocean Decade has created a free Ocean Image Bank so folks like you and me can blow people away with a range of beautiful images of our Blue Planet! It's one of many amazing resources to come out of the Ocean Decade to support Ocean educators. Check it out here: <https://www.theoceanagency.org/ocean-image-bank>.

Strutting the main stage

The main conference itself all took place at this one great big venue in Parque das Nações, think football field size stadium. I cannot stress how intense the program for this conference was! Everything is happening everywhere, all at once. The only way to overcome this, naturally, is to make many, many friends. A coordinated effort. I found myself heading off to a plenary or discussion and somewhere, over free sparkling, me and my newfound friends picked apart the findings and revelations of our respective events.

I should mention, to get in, you had to be a pre-approved delegate of a registered organisation. For all of the Australians reading this, I scanned the list for ages trying to find an Australian university or institute to call home. Mostly to acquire a free weeklong ticket to Portugal's excellent metro service and sneak into the food truck area of the conference, and yes, also to get into the mainstage and watch the proceedings in-person! Despite the seemingly endless coastlines of Australia, the biodiversity hotspots, the fisheries, our involvement in Antarctic and Southern Ocean affairs, the Great Barrier Reef and so many ocean focused research institutions - very few Australian delegations were registered. Even fewer Australians were in attendance (something I'm hoping we can change before the next one in France 2025)!

In fact, if we are being honest, my biggest critique was that UNOC was heavily Euro-centric. I heard from many hopeful delegates that the COVID restrictions presented a number of challenges, also that visa issues persisted for many members attending from non-European countries. When we are talking about "the global Ocean", it is so important to make sure *all voices* are represented and an active part of the conversation.

Despite my lack of delegation to call home, I still managed to sneak into a fair few catered events and networking drinks. No complaints there.

In the main event, delegates from around the world would take to the stage to declare their countries needs and commitments for the Ocean Decade. Australia proudly announced their new government, saying the environment was back on the agenda. A reason for hope.



Figure 2: Meeting an iconic Ocean hero like Sylvia Earle is definitely going on the highlight reel for this trip. I was blown away by her knowledge of the Ocean surrounding Iutruwita/Tasmania. We had a good old chat about the whale foraging event that took place in 2020 along the Tasman peninsula and the amazing kelp forests that many at CMS are helping to understand and recover. It was when Sylvia knew all about my PhD on plastic pollution on Lord Howe Island that I was truly gob-smacked. How does one acquire so much ocean knowledge?

Would you like sides with that?



Figure 3: Not Ocean related at all. I just really love these Portuguese treats. (pastéis de nata).

Now this is where it was at! The Side Events!

I was LIVING for the side events. And there were so many. For the most part they were organised by a range of different groups, universities, research teams, and NGOs. Because so many folks had gathered in Lisbon for this conference it was the perfect platform to connect and collaborate. I attended a screening of an upcoming film by Plastic Oceans. And somehow, I dragged myself out of bed early enough to attend free breakfasts paired with panel discussions. I sailed into the Atlantic Ocean and plunged into the ocean at sunrise for an ECOP networking event. I even attended a sort of conference inception about plastic pollution (like the movie, “inception”. A conference within a conference and given how sleep deprived I was at this point it was hard to tell if this had all been one big fever dream).

It is important to remember, this was my first ever (in-person) international conference and I think I may have been overexcited. I started every morning at around 7am with a coffee and a plate of pastéis de nata (if you know, you know). Then usually it was (free) breakfast at the aquarium listening to a panel discussion on ocean equity, or conservation, or plastic mitigation. And despite the pastéis de nata and the buffet breakfast I came back to Hobart thinner than I’d ever been. I swear each day consisted of back-to-back side events and conferences scattered all over the city of Lisbon from Bairro Alto to Cascais! I was sprinting from event to event – I think I can still recite the stops on the red and blue metro lines off by heart.

It was here, in the intimate side events that the best networking took place. The pace was slower. The talks were digestible, and the pressure was off. I had found myself a little disillusioned with the mainstage. For the most part it was a call to action on a decade that we are already two years into. The side events however, were focused on key themes with many people presenting real, actionable solutions to ocean issues. I was constantly reminded of all the efforts across the globe to care for and understand the marine environment. Isolated efforts on their own alone, but when presented together, I was filled with hope for our future.



Figure 4: Probably the greatest highlight of UNOC2022 was getting to hang out with the wonderful folks I've been collaborating with virtually over the last few years. Here's the team from the #OceanPlasticWorkshop. If you missed it... why? Find out all the goss here: <https://www.oceanplasticworkshop.com>.

ECOPs to the front

I couldn't help but notice the emphasis and calls from senior ocean professionals for the *youth of tomorrow to step up*. Often times I found myself looking around the room, thinking, 'everyone in here is around my age or career level. We are here. We are stepping up. Give us a platform to do what we need to do!'

I heard of a group of ECR law students who were providing legal advice to NGOs who otherwise count afford such services. Their services were voluntary. They were driven by a vocation to advocate for our shared environment, as the generation who will have to live with the outcomes of decisions made – or not made, today.

The ECOPs of the CMS have been playing a huge role in the Ocean decade! First and foremost, the recent [Future Seas](#) initiative was born around SDG.14 (Life Underwater) and saw a number of ECOPs lead large think pieces on the challenges and solutions facing the Ocean.

Rachel Kelly and I are involved in the diversity, equity and inclusions (DEI), and ocean literacy task teams. And members from these teams recently published a paper [regarding ocean literacy](#). And don't forget this awesome paper on [building gender equity in the Ocean sciences](#) from a number of CMS co-authors.

And this is just the list of contributions from the ECOPs of CMS. There is a growing network of ECOPs working all around the globe to shape the future for our Ocean. You can get involved too! Join the network on the stakeholder engagement forum and sign up to the ECOP newsletter to stay up to date on all the hot goss. Probably doesn't hurt to follow along on the socials too!

Twitter: [@V_ECOPS](#) [@OceanDecadeECOP](#) [@UNOceanDecade](#) [@CMS_Utas](#) [@PeterPuskic](#)

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Figure 5: ECOPs are pathing the way in the Ocean Decade! <https://www.ecopdecade.org/>