



Shipping's strides in environmental protection are genuine
– just nowhere near fast enough

Full steam, half speed

by Ewa Kochańska

The maritime sector has made measurable progress in reducing its impact on global oceans, but it remains well short of the scale and pace of change needed to meet its 2030 ambitions, according to the first *Shipping and Ocean Health 2026* progress report. This extensive publication, which shows where the industry stands on ocean health and biodiversity, found both positive and concerning developments. A bright spot is that tighter international limits on underwater noise and ship recycling are taking effect, while investments in green vessel tech continue to ramp up. There is also a clearer grasp of shipping's total footprint, backed by a fast-growing market for eco-conscious funding. On the other hand, measures to protect marine life are advancing too slowly, funding for ocean protection is subpar, and issues ranging from pollution and biofouling to marine spatial planning need much more attention. The report concluded that the industry possesses sufficient tools and knowledge to have a more considerable impact and should now channel its notable successes into coordinated, industry-wide action.

The *2030 Marine Biodiversity and Ocean Health (MBOH) Breakthrough and Roadmap*, a United Nations Climate Change Conference COP29 initiative, provided specific actions and milestones for the maritime sector to deliver on by the decade's end to ensure that the achievement of a sustainable ocean economy by mid-century is possible. The *Shipping and Ocean Health 2026* report analysed where the sector stands now regarding the initiative's goal of reducing "the impact of international shipping on marine biodiversity by 30% by 2030," based on its three objectives: reducing impact on marine biodiversity, developing effective marine spatial planning, and establishing systems for sustainable ocean governance.

Uneven waters

The first objective covers four areas where the industry's day-to-day operations impact ocean health: voyage and port planning, emissions, vessel efficiency, and pollution. The report found that here, progress is mixed.

In voyage planning, underwater noise is receiving greater attention, with the International Maritime Organization's (IMO) work, national initiatives, and improved monitoring gradually bringing

the issue into focus. Investment in quieter technology is also increasing, bolstered by the fact that many measures also reduce fuel consumption. Also, actions in areas such as just-in-time arrivals and guidance on avoiding marine mammals appear to be working well. However, reliable regional data remains patchy, particularly in less developed parts of the world, and so is cooperation between shipping and other ocean industries.

Decarbonisation offers perhaps the clearest opportunity to deliver environmental gains beyond cutting greenhouse gases (GHG). Cleaner propulsion and lower fuel consumption can also reduce pollutants like nitrogen and sulphur oxides, black carbon, and particulate matter. Yet, even here there is much to be done, according to the report. Work to improve emissions data is progressing well while infrastructure for zero/near-zero fuels is being developed at key ports; what remains lacking is investment in the vessels and technology needed to use these fuels (due to demand uncertainty). International policy is moving forward, but divergent national approaches are compounding uncertainty. In contrast, improvements in ship design are already producing advantages; for example, aside from consuming less bunker, more efficient hulls and propulsion systems can also contribute to quieter vessels and less mechanical disturbance.

Pollution presents a more fragmented challenge. The publication points to established environmental damage from greywater, scrubber discharges, artificial light, plastics, invasive species carried by ships, and vessel recycling, to which the sector's response has often failed to match the scale of the problem. There have nevertheless been some notable improvements; for example, in June 2025, the Hong Kong Convention on ship recycling came into force, and the risks associated with greywater, scrubber effluent, and invasive aquatic organisms are increasingly well documented. Lagging are light pollution and plastic waste, where further research and stronger sector-wide responses are still needed. The report also notes that research into the environmental impacts of new marine green fuels is progressing more slowly than studies on their GHG-reducing benefits.

Investment represents the weakest area in tackling pollution beyond what regulations require. Although rules have helped curb some of the most damaging discharges, the report finds little evidence of substantial global spending on measures addressing ballast water, scrubber effluent, greywater, or plastic waste beyond regulatory minimums. Ship recycling is similarly awaiting a meaningful increase in investment following the introduction of the new regulatory regime.



Biofouling stands out as an exception: spending is growing because keeping hulls clean brings a direct commercial return through lower resistance and fuel consumption. More broadly and unsurprisingly, the report found that environmental measures are most likely to advance when they also make operational and financial sense.

Taken together, the findings show an industry that has begun to address many of its effects on marine ecosystems, but at very different speeds and in a somewhat piecemeal fashion. Measures that overlap with bunker savings, decarbonisation, or established regulation are generally further ahead, while issues with fewer obvious commercial incentives continue to drag behind. The challenge now is to turn existing solutions into routine practices, strengthen cooperation beyond the maritime sector, and find a way to attract capital to environmental problems that may not offer financial payback right away.

Protection pending

The second objective, to develop effective marine spatial planning, is an area where progress has been notably slower. The report found that at present, only 9.8% of ocean territory has protected status (it should be 30% by 2030), and existing commitments are not enough to close the gap. Even where protections have been introduced, there is uncertainty surrounding their effectiveness: only 1.62% of protected ocean areas have been assessed for their effectiveness. The sheer size of the zones involved, limited enforcement resources,

and concerns over whether protection is distributed fairly add to the problem.

Shipping has nevertheless been involved in marine conservation planning for decades, most notably through the IMO's designation of 19 Particularly Sensitive Sea Areas. The BBNJ Agreement (the Agreement on Marine Biological Diversity of Areas beyond National Jurisdiction, also known as the High Seas Treaty) could provide a fresh incentive by creating an international framework for safeguarding ocean biodiversity, but much of the supporting work is still at an early stage. Research and enforcement capacity in developing countries has yet to palpably improve, while broader cross-sector knowledge exchange between maritime and other high-seas sectors remains limited. As with pollution, the report suggests that progress has been slower partly because marine spatial planning has fewer direct links to the industry's decarbonisation drive.

Putting money where the ocean is

The third objective turns to the frameworks and capital required to enable ocean protection at a global level. The report described a system that remains fragmented, with national, regional, and international rules often centred on individual industries or localized threats rather than the ocean as a whole. For shipping, the IMO remains the main regulatory body and has delivered significant advances on emissions and pollution. The next challenge is to connect maritime policy more closely with the decisions being made across other ocean industries and conservation initiatives.

There are some signs of movement in that direction. The maritime sector's early involvement in discussions around the BBNJ Agreement is encouraging. However, creating a genuinely coordinated approach will require shipping to have a clearer role in emerging international arrangements and closer links between maritime regulation, the management of ocean space, and broader environmental priorities. For now, the report classified this work as in progress rather than fully institutionalised.

Finance presents a much larger obstacle. An estimated \$175 billion a year is required to meet global ocean health goals, yet just \$10 billion was committed across all sectors in 2015-19. The report found no dedicated funding mechanism operating at anything close to the scale required, while the proposed One Ocean Finance Facility, one of the few international initiatives intended to address the shortfall, is not scheduled to launch until 2028. This leaves the sector facing a substantial gap between environmental ambitions and the capital available to deliver them.

There has been more movement in the financial industry itself, as environmental considerations are gradually finding their way into disclosure and investment frameworks. New guidance published in 2025 by the Taskforce on Nature-related Financial Disclosures includes maritime industries, while other initiatives are beginning to encourage banks, regulators, and investors to consider the health of marine ecosystems alongside more established environmental measures. Even so, such thinking remains



largely absent from standard practice in lending, insurance, and chartering decisions that influence much of shipping's behaviour.

Blue finance is another area showing potential, although its applicability to shipping remains unclear. Issuance under blue bond programmes rose from \$110 million in 2018 to around \$1.5 billion in 2023, with further growth expected, particularly in Asia. The maritime industry has been an early participant, but the report found there is still little evidence of blue loans and bonds being adopted across the sector at scale. Hence, while financing tools are beginning to emerge, turning them into a meaningful source of capital for shipping's environmental transition is a challenge.

From plans to practice

Looking ahead to 2026 and 2027, the report maintains that the 2030 target remains achievable, but only if the industry moves much faster from isolated initiatives to widespread implementation. Many of the necessary technologies and practices already exist, so shifting the emphasis from innovation to implementation of proven solutions would be more beneficial. At the same time, unresolved data gaps need to be addressed and stronger commercial incentives created, ensuring environmental protection becomes embedded in routine operations rather than an additional, costly consideration.

The report underscored in its recommendations the need to bring ocean health into the financial and commercial

decisions that shape shipping. Lending, insurance, chartering, and corporate risk assessments already exert considerable influence over investment with too little concern for the wider effects on marine ecosystems. The publication proposed incorporating biodiversity and other ocean-related criteria into financing agreements, charter negotiations, and long-term investment strategies, alongside some climate measures already gaining ground. This would also help prepare for upcoming requirements in areas such as underwater noise and biosecurity, instead of waiting for regulation to force action.

Better access to environmental information at sea is another priority. Considerable data already exists on migratory routes, sensitive habitats, voluntary speed restrictions, and areas where vessels should take particular care around marine mammals; however, much of it is not readily available through on-board navigational systems. Integrating this information directly into electronic charts could allow crews to make relatively minor adjustments to routes or operations without complicating voyage planning.

The report also highlighted the opportunity to maximise environmental co-benefits from the billions already being spent on decarbonisation. Investments made primarily to cut emissions can often address several other problems at little additional cost. Propeller designs can lower both fuel consumption and underwater noise, for example, while non-toxic antifouling systems can improve efficiency and reduce the spread of

invasive species. The message is that climate and biodiversity investments need not compete for the same envelope if projects can be designed with both in mind.

For its part, the MBOH Breakthrough initiative plans to concentrate on helping to turn these ideas into action. Over the coming year, it intends to work with financiers, insurers, and charterers on marine health indicators that could coexist with GHG-reducing measures in commercial decision-making, while strengthening links with established financial and sustainability frameworks. It also plans targeted pilots in areas where evidence, business incentives, or workable operating models are still suboptimal, with particular attention to resource-constrained regions facing significant biodiversity threats.

Finally, the initiative wants to broaden participation beyond the organisations already engaged in this work. Shipowners, ports, charterers, tech companies, and financial institutions will all need to be part of the process, along with governments and civil society. Particular emphasis will be placed on bringing in regions that are both environmentally vulnerable and currently under-represented. Ultimately, the recommendations put forth in *Shipping and Ocean Health 2026* underscore the need for a shift from ambition to execution: the sector already knows much of what needs to be done, but meeting the 2030 goal will depend on making those measures practical, investable, and routine across the global maritime sector. □