

# 10 key messages for reimagining ocean literacies that consider children's human rights to development and culture

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## Introduction

In May 2023, the United Nations (UN) Committee on the Rights of the Child (the Committee) adopted [General Comment No. 26 \(GC26\)](#) on children's rights and the environment with a special focus on climate change,<sup>1</sup> following extensive engagements with and inputs from children worldwide, States, human rights institutions, children's organisations, civil society and research programmes such as the One Ocean Hub. In August 2023, the GC26 was published.

The GC26 emphasises that children have the right to a clean, healthy and sustainable environment, linking this to children's rights to life, health, survival and development, education and adequate standard of living as stipulated by the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC).<sup>2</sup> Alongside this, the GC26 underscores that children should be recognised as agents of change, and that environmental decision-making must provide opportunities for children's meaningful participation.<sup>3</sup> This, we argue, must involve prioritising children's access to decolonised and contextually-relevant environmental education and ocean literacies, in order to support the full realisation of children's human rights that are dependent on a healthy ocean.



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## KEY MESSAGES

- 1. Ocean literacies should respect and build on children's human right to a healthy environment**
- 2. Consider the dependence of children's development on a healthy ocean from a children's human rights perspective**
- 3. Make explicit considerations of children's right to culture**
- 4. Promote plurality of ocean knowledges**
- 5. Integrate and recognise a broad spectrum of environmental justice issues in the ocean context**
- 6. Contextualise ocean literacy programmes, curricula and education processes**
- 7. Engage in vernacular two-way communication processes**
- 8. Co-develop ocean literacies for children with children**
- 9. Provide children with opportunity to participate, not responsibility to participate**
- 10. Learn from existing ocean stewardship and connections**

1 UN. 2023. General Comment No. 26. on children's rights and the environment with a special focus on climate change, New York: United Nations.

2 GC26.

3 Shields, S., Longo, A., Strand, M. and Morgera, E. 2023a. Children's Human Right to be Heard at the Ocean-Climate Nexus, *International Journal of Marine and Coastal Law*, 38:3, 545-580. <https://doi.org/10.1163/15718085-bja10140>; UN, 2023.v

In the GC26, the Committee embraces a holistic approach to what is understood as a healthy environment, clarifying that '[w]hile the present general comment is focused on climate change, its application should not be limited to any particular environmental issue'.<sup>4</sup> The importance of understanding the interconnections between the three planetary crises (climate change, biodiversity loss and toxic pollution) and the role of the ocean in addressing them had been advocated by the Hub throughout the development of the GC26. The GC26 recognises the interdependence of children's rights on a healthy environment, and urges States to take immediate action to protect children from biodiversity loss, pervasive pollution and climate emergency including marine aspects such as transforming industrial fisheries, protecting marine ecosystems and preventing marine pollution.<sup>5</sup>

In this policy brief, we provide ten recommendations to re-imagine ocean literacies which the wider ocean community can engage with to critically recognise and advance children's human rights to development and culture that depend on a healthy ocean. Specifically, these recommendations are relevant to researchers, institutions and funders involved in the UN Decade of Ocean Science for Sustainable Development (2021-2030) (UN Ocean Decade).<sup>6</sup>

## Setting the scene

### *The ocean is important for children's human right to development*

- Children's right to development is stipulated by the UNCRC, stating that 'States Parties shall ensure to the maximum extent possible the survival and development of the child',<sup>7</sup> which means that governments should do 'all they can to ensure that children survive and develop to their full potential'.
- Children's development should be understood as a holistic concept 'embracing the child's physical, mental, spiritual, moral, psychological and social development'.<sup>8</sup>

<sup>4</sup> GC26: Para 5.

<sup>5</sup> Morgera, E. and Shields, S. 2023. UN guidance on children's human right to a healthy environment calls for protecting marine ecosystems, transforming industrial fisheries, and preventing marine pollution, One Ocean Hub;

<sup>6</sup> UNESCO. 2020. The science we need for the ocean we want. The United Nations Decade of Ocean Science for Sustainable Development (2021–2030), New York: United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization.

<sup>7</sup> UNCRC. 1990. Convention on the Rights of the Child, New York: United Nations General Assembly, Article 6.2.

<sup>8</sup> This is emphasised by the UNCRC through UNCRC. 2003. General Comment No. 5, General measures of implementation of the Convention on the Rights of the Child, Geneva: United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child.

<sup>9</sup> This is adapted from Peleg's argument of the Capability Approach as the foundation for children's rights to development. See Peleg, 2016. Reconceptualising the Child's Right to Development: Children and the Capability Approach, *The International Journal of Children's Rights*, 21, 523-542. <https://doi.org/10.1163/15718182-02103003>; Peleg, 2019. *The Child's Right to Development*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

<sup>10</sup> See UN. 2022. Report of the Special Rapporteur in the field of cultural rights, Alexandra Xanthaki, New York: United Nations General Assembly.

<sup>11</sup> The UN Declaration on the Right to Development (UN, 1986, Article 6.2) stipulates that 'All human rights and fundamental freedoms are indivisible and interdependent; equal attention and urgent consideration should be given to the implementation, promotion and protection of civil, political, economic, social and cultural rights'.

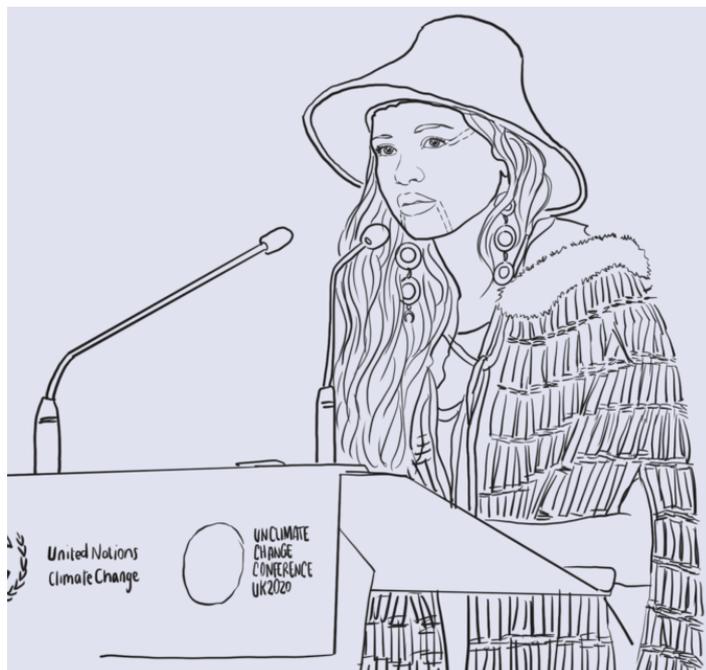


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- Children's right to development thus depends on healthy food, nutrition, health, water cycle and climate regulation and all of these, in turn, depend on a healthy ocean.
- Children's development should be understood as a process that facilitates children's ability to shape their lives in a way which affirms their agency - expanding their capability, increasing their real opportunities, and asserting that children should not be bound by choices made by others.<sup>9</sup>

### *The ocean is important for children's cultural rights*

- Some children form part of communities with long-standing spiritual and cultural connections to the ocean.
- The ocean is for many a place of cultural heritage, and is interlinked with Indigenous and local knowledge systems, individual and community identities, customary fishing practices and livelihoods.
- Ocean governance and mainstream ocean science, however, generally pay unduly limited attention to culture and cultural heritage, and children's access to traditional, Indigenous and local ocean-related knowledge should be prioritised.
- There have been concerns raised about discrimination and historical stereotyping of ocean-related cultures of small-scale fishers and Indigenous peoples, which hinders their potential contribution to sustainable economic development through a holistic and integrated environmental ethos.<sup>10</sup>

### *Children's rights to development and culture are interconnected*

- How development is understood is influenced by culture and cultural contexts, and therefore cannot be seen as separate from each other.<sup>11</sup>

- This is also the case when it comes to children's rights to a healthy environment, as children's needs and aspirations when it comes to marine spaces and resources are framed and enriched by cultural, spiritual and recreational connections to the ocean.
- Recognising the interconnectedness between children's rights to development and culture is relevant for ocean governance, in order to help to clarify and promote ocean decision-making which creates and facilitates space for children's voices and contributes to the protection of children's human rights.

### The role of ocean literacies

- There is a growing global recognition of the importance of what is termed 'ocean literacy' to advance ocean sustainability
- Ocean literacy can simply be defined as 'an understanding of your influence on the ocean, and its influence on you', or understood as a complex and adaptive concept that involves several dimensions such as awareness, access and experiences, emotional connections, and knowledge.<sup>12</sup>
- Ocean literacy is emerging as a promising aspect of global ocean governance, having recently been endorsed as a crucial focus of the UN Ocean Decade.<sup>13</sup>
- We argue for referring to ocean literacies (plural), instead of ocean literacy, because there are several different ways of knowing and understanding the ocean, so ocean literacies should reflect this pluriversity in environmental education as part of the recognition and protection of children's cultural rights.
- An increased and refocused emphasis on ocean literacies that recognises and elevates multiple cultural connections to the ocean can thus support the protection of children's rights to development and cultural rights in relation to a healthy ocean. Specifically, we argue that ocean literacies that celebrate the multitude and plurality of ocean knowledges<sup>14</sup> can prevent discriminatory ocean management practices that continue to impact children that are most vulnerable to environmental rights regression and violation.

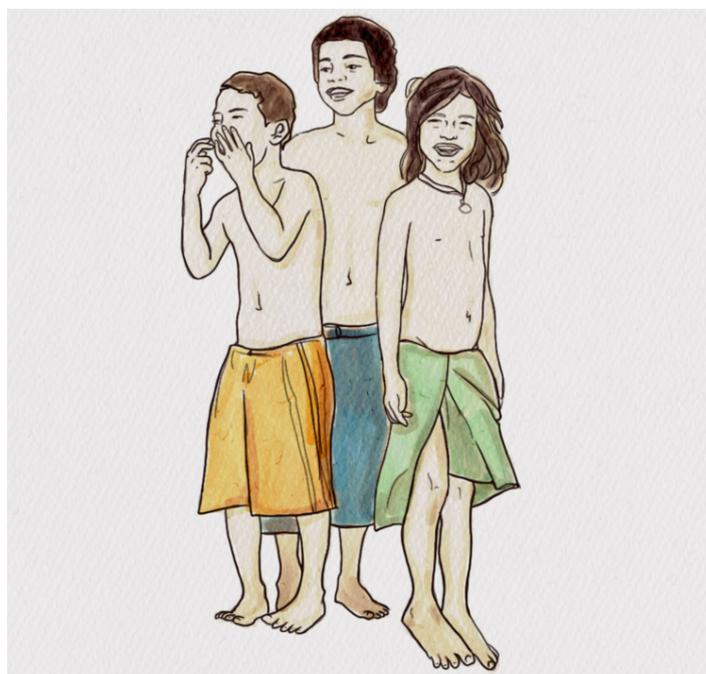


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## 10 key messages for reimagined ocean literacies in environmental education

### 1. Ocean literacies should respect and build on children's human right to a healthy environment

- a. Building on the adoption of the GC26, consider the various ways for ocean literacies to contribute to respecting and upholding children's right to a healthy environment.
- b. Consider the contribution of the ocean to protecting children's access to clean air, a safe and stable climate, healthy ecosystems and biodiversity, safe and sufficient water, healthy and sustainable food and non-toxic environments.<sup>15</sup>
- c. Consider the contributions of the ocean to other interdependent children's human rights to life, survival and development, to the highest attainable standard of health, including the dangers and risks of environmental pollution, to an adequate standard of living, and to education, including the development of respect for the natural environment.<sup>16</sup>

### 2. Consider the dependence of children's development on a healthy ocean from a children's human rights perspective

- a. Consider the various ways in which ocean literacies and education can contribute to a holistic understanding of children's development as a process that facilitates their ability to shape their lives in a way which affirms their agency.
- b. Develop ocean literacies and education in ways that also support the protection of children's rights to be heard and contribute to making informed decisions about the ocean.<sup>17</sup>
- c. Recognise a holistic systems approach to the environment in ocean literacies and education, addressing the connectivity and mutual impacts of biodiversity loss, climate change, and pollution across land-sea interfaces, and acknowledging people and culture as part of the environment,<sup>18</sup> instead of seeing them as separate.

<sup>12</sup> McKinley, E., Burdon, D. and Shellock, R. J. 2023. The evolution of ocean literacy: A new framework for the United Nations Ocean Decade and beyond, *Marine Pollution Bulletin*, 186:114467.

<sup>13</sup> See UNESCO (2020).

<sup>14</sup> We refer to knowledges, instead of knowledge, to recognise that there are plural ways of knowing the ocean. Promoting plurality of knowledges also recognise that 'knowledges are underpinned and building on different cultures and that no culture is hegemonic or universal' (see Strand, M., Rivers, N., Baasch, R. and Snow, B. 2022a. Developing arts-based participatory research for more inclusive knowledge co-production in Algoa Bay, *Current Research in Environmental Sustainability*, 4:100178. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.crsust.2022.100178>, page 4; also see Mignolo, W. D. 2000. *Local histories, global designs: subaltern knowledges and border thinking*, Princeton: Princeton University Press; De Sousa Santos, B. 2018. *Decolonising the University: The Challenge of Deep Cognitive Justice*, Cambridge: Cambridge Scholars Publishing; Gwaravanda, E. T. and Ndofirepi, A. P. 2021. *African Higher Education in the 21st Century: Epistemological, Ontological and Ethical Perspectives*, New York: Brill/Sense).

<sup>15</sup> UN, 2023:para 64. <sup>16</sup> UN, 2023:para 63.

### 3. Make explicit considerations of children's right to culture

- a. The ocean is 'an important element in the heritage of many cultures', which should be better accounted for in both ocean decision-making and ocean literacies.
- b. Recognise that children depend on the ocean for identities, Indigenous and local knowledges, spiritual connections, religious practices, cultural heritage and customary livelihoods.
- c. Develop multiple ocean literacies that appreciates cultural diversity and recognises multiple culture's<sup>19</sup> contribution to ocean knowledges, ocean governance and sustainable development, which is contextually defined.

### 4. Promote plurality of ocean knowledges

- a. To better account for 'the breadth, depth, and diversity of varying social, cultural, economic, geographical, and ecological contexts' in which people and communities interact with and connect with the ocean.
- b. Include reflections based on critical justice and environmental justice approaches— particularly considering what knowledge is informing environmental education and decision-making processes – and how ocean decision-making can influence and impact children's development and cultural rights.

### 5. Integrate and recognise a broad spectrum of environmental justice issues in the ocean context<sup>20</sup>

- a. Distributive justice: Disproportionate impacts of marine harms, impacting learning and development
- b. Procedural justice: Equitable opportunities to meaningfully engage in ocean decision-making (therefore prioritising children who are currently marginalised and left out)
- c. Recognition: Equal treatment and recognition of rights, values and needs in environmental education
- d. Cognitive justice: Equitable valuation of ocean knowledges (see point 4 above)
- e. Contextual justice: Responding to existing socio-economic inequalities and access to a healthy ocean
- f. Restorative justice: Repairing and correcting harmful practices, and restoring relationships with the ocean
- g. The integration of a holistic perspective on environmental justice, particularly focusing on contextual and recognitional



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justice in ocean literacies, can serve to prevent from perpetuating (even if inadvertently) discriminatory views and practices in ocean conservation and management.

### 6. Contextualise ocean literacy programmes, curricula and education processes

- a. These programmes need to be adapted to different cultural contexts, as sustainable development means different things in different contexts
- b. This includes adapting access to ocean literacies to children who continue to be excluded or marginalised from decision-making, paying particular attention to girls,<sup>21</sup> Indigenous children and children with disabilities, as well as including their distinctive perspectives on and relations with the ocean.
- c. The importance of equitable access to information and education, considering aspects such as recognising that access to education is removed or interrupted for children living in coastal communities vulnerable to rising sea levels, floods and hurricanes, not to mention the psychological barriers these traumatic events create for children's ability to learn.
- d. Embodied and place-based learning, which emphasises the importance of the place in which learning happens and the role of marine and coastal areas on children's processes of learning,<sup>22</sup> should be pursued when possible, as children learn from their everyday mundane experiences and interactions with their environments.
- e. Ocean literacy programmes and curricula should therefore be 'given the space and means to be developed within the target language community, ensuring maximum relevance and community ownership of terms and concepts'.<sup>23</sup>

### 7. Engage in vernacular two-way communication processes

- a. Vernacular refers to context-specific language and ways of communicating, therefore underscoring the need to adapt children's access to information and opportunities to share their views according to their specific local contexts and languages.
- b. Solely online, English-centred engagement platforms will be limited in their reach to children that are disproportionately affected by environmental degradation, climate change impacts and marine pollution, and more equitable and inclusive two-way communication channels should be prioritised.

17 See Shields, S., Morgera, E., Strand, M. and Longo, A. 2023b. Policy Brief: A Framework for Facilitating Children's Participation in International Processes at the Ocean-Climate Nexus, One Ocean Hub. <http://dx.doi.org/10.13140/RG.2.2.10569.11364>.

18 Convention on Biological Diversity. 2004. Decision adopted by the Conference of the Parties to the Convention on Biological Diversity at its seventh meeting, VII/11 Ecosystem Approach, Kuala Lumpur: Conference of the Parties to the Convention on Biological Diversity, V/6 para 2.

19 See UNESCO, "The 7 Principles of ocean literacy" Ocean Literacy Portal 2023, URL: <https://oceanliteracy.unesco.org/principles/> [Accessed 9th June 2023].

20 See Bennett, N. J. 2022. Mainstreaming equity and justice in the ocean, *Frontiers in Marine Science*, 9:873572. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fmars.2022.873572>, and the One Ocean Hub Info-Sheet no 3 on environmental justice from a Global South perspective.

21 UN. 2022. Report of the Special Rapporteur on Human Rights and the Environment, David Boyd, Women, Girls and the Right to a Healthy Environment: Good practices. New York: United Nations General Assembly.

22 See Ingold T. 2011. *The Perception of the Environment: Essays on Livelihood, Dwelling and Skill*, 2nd edition, London: Routledge; Preston, C. 2003. *Grounding knowledge environmental philosophy, epistemology, and place*, London: University of Georgia Press.

- c. This communication should be pursued as a process, not a once-off transactional event. An example is providing children feedback on how their views have been incorporated into decision-making and policies, and developing opportunities for children to be involved in iterative adaptations on how their views will and should inform programmes, projects and education.

## 8. Co-develop ocean literacies for children with children

- a. Children should be actively involved in framing, forming and developing their environmental education, ocean literacies and participation modalities.
- b. Currently, much of what is designed for children is didactic and “awareness” focused,<sup>24</sup> whilst few programmes are engaging meaningfully with children to ensure they are actively involved in environmental education.

## 9. Provide children with opportunity to participate, not responsibility to participate

- a. It should be always clarified that it is the responsibility of adults to protect the environment and the ocean, and to protect children’s rights; it is not the responsibility of children.
- b. Care should be exercised to avoid placing the burden of the ‘future’ onto children, which has shown to cause a huge level of anxiety and eco-grief among them.
- c. To that end, ‘future’-oriented and focused framings for children’s work in environmental policy should be critically assessed, to avoid misrepresentations of whose responsibility it is to address the triple planetary crises.
- d. Focus on opportunities for children to meaningfully participate according to their preferred means and approaches to express themselves, prioritising opportunities for children to co-create through play and art.<sup>25</sup>

## 10. Learn from existing ocean stewardship and connections

- a. We should consider children’s context-dependent, embodied, cultural and self-determined relationships with the ocean.
- b. Social-ecological systems approach already de facto in some communities and cultures,<sup>26</sup> which can be better recognised in ocean literacies programmes and curricula.
- c. We can learn from existing practices, Indigenous knowledges, coastal communities’ relationships and connections with the ocean that are caring, interdependent and multidimensional, to inform how to better co-exist with the ocean.<sup>27</sup>



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In conclusion, there are several theoretical and practical ways in which researchers and the broader ocean governance community can better consider children’s human rights to development and culture in their work and practice. A critical consideration of environmental justice aspects and the need to recognise that there are various ocean cultures and ocean knowledges would be a step in the right direction to start reimagining ocean literacies to better account for children’s realities. Our advances towards more sustainable decision-making for a healthy ocean should continuously consider the human rights of children, and a place to start would be to better recognise the role it plays in children’s everyday lives.

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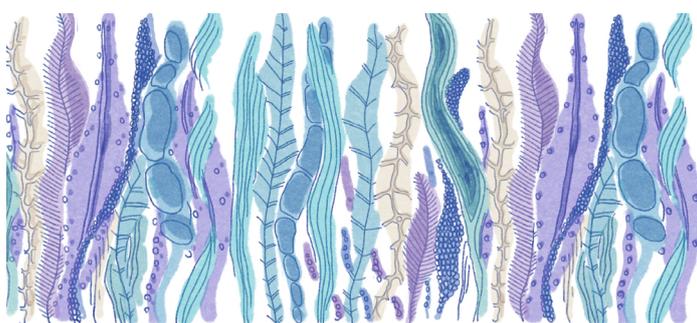


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23 MacNeil, S., Hoover, C., Ostertag, J., Yumagulova, L. and Glithero, L. 2021. Coming to terms with ocean literacy, *The Canadian Journal of Environmental Education*, 24:1, page 246.

24 See UNICEF. 2018. Learning through play Strengthening learning through play in early childhood education programmes, New York: United Nations Children’s Fund; UNESCO. 2018. Ocean Literacy for all: A toolkit, Paris: IOC/UNESCO.

25 See Shields et al. (2023b).

26 See Trisos, C. H., Auerbach, J. and Katti, M. 2021. Decoloniality and anti-oppressive practices for a more ethical ecology, *Nature Ecology & Evolution*, 5, 1205–1212. <https://doi.org/10.1038/s41559-021-01460-w>.

27 See Hau’ofa, E. 1998. The Ocean in Us, *The Contemporary Pacific*, 10:2, 391–410. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/23706895>; Mulalap, C. Y., Frere, T. Huffer, E. Hviding, E. Paul, K. Smith, A. and Vierros, M. K. 2020. Traditional Knowledge and the BBNJ Instrument, *Marine Policy*, 122:104103, 1–10. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.marpol.2020.104103>; Okafor-Yarwood I., Kadagi, N. I. Miranda, N. A. Uku, J. Elegbede, I. O. and Adewumi, I. J. 2020. The Blue Economy—Cultural Livelihood—Ecosystem Conservation Triangle: The African Experience, *Frontiers in Marine Science*, 7:586. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fmars.2020.00586>; Strand, M., Rivers, N. and Snow, B. 2022b. Reimagining Ocean Stewardship: Arts-Based Methods to ‘Hear’ and ‘See’ Indigenous and Local Knowledge in Ocean Management, *Frontiers in Marine Science*, 9:886632. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fmars.2022.886632>.

