

# What child environmental human rights defenders need to know to defend and protect a healthy ocean

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See first: [Child-Friendly General Comment 26 on Children's Rights and the Environment, with a Special Focus on Climate Change](#)

This information sheet is for child environmental human rights defenders, to support their action and advocacy on the impact of a healthy ocean on children's rights.

In the 2023 General Comment 26 on children's rights and the environment, the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child told us that all children's rights are equally important. But, right now, some rights are especially threatened by environmental harm and climate change, and it is essential to think about the role of a healthy ocean too. Other rights are also especially important to help protect children's rights against these harms.

## Introduction

The world currently faces three different environmental harms, which are all important and linked together to respect, protect, and fulfil a clean, healthy, and sustainable future. These environmental crises are:

- Climate change: As the earth gets warmer, the weather can become more extreme and difficult to predict, including things like droughts, floods, extreme heat and extreme cold.



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## KEY MESSAGES

### Child environmental rights defenders:

- **should be recognised and protected whether they are defending a safe climate, biodiversity or the ocean, which are linked together and are important to protect children's rights.**
  - **should share awareness of the ocean's important role in all three kinds of environmental harms (climate change, biodiversity loss and toxic pollution), as losing a healthy ocean impacts life on land too.**
  - **have an important role in holding governments to their responsibilities to protect children's right to a healthy environment, including to consider children's rights in all decisions about the environment, and consider the environment in all decisions about children.**
  - **Are at the very heart of the worldwide movement to protect the environment, but should not bear the burden of protecting the environment: all child-led action must be voluntary.**
  - **Should be supported by adult allies in the environmental, biodiversity, climate and ocean communities.**
- Biodiversity loss: There are millions of different species of plants and animals in the world, and many of them are struggling to adapt to the changing climate.
  - Toxic pollution: When dangerous or harmful substances get into the air, soil and water, it can be very harmful to the planet, plants, and animals.

### Why is it important to talk about the ocean as part of climate change?

The ocean plays a critical role in each of these areas of environmental harm.

- **Clean air & safe climate:** When we burn fuel for cars or factories, it releases carbon dioxide into the air. The ocean acts like a sponge which can absorb some of that carbon dioxide, which helps to keep our air clean and our climate cool.
- **Healthy ecosystems and biodiversity:** Marine biodiversity means all the different species of plants and animals that live together in the ocean, from bustling coral reefs to huge whales. Marine ecosystems are how these things live together. The different plants and animals in the ocean rely on each other to survive, and live in a special balance. They also rely on a healthy and clean ocean, and losing one species because of harm to the ocean can have a big knock-on effect to others.
- **Safe water free from toxic pollution:** Marine pollution happens when harmful things end up in the ocean and make the water dirty, or unsafe for the plants and animals to live in. This pollution includes plastic and other types of trash made by humans, oil, chemicals and sewage. Animals often mistake the things humans throw away into the ocean as food, which can make them unwell. The other forms of pollution can make the water unsafe for plants and animals to live in.
- **Healthy food:** The ocean's plants and animals provide humans with lots of different types of food, including things like fish, seafood, seaweed and kelp. This type of food is full of nutrients and vitamins which are important for many growing children's brains and bodies. The plants and animals in the ocean also create important jobs, like fishing, which help families provide for their children. However, humans have to be careful to not take too much from the ocean, so they don't disturb the ocean's ecosystems.



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## What have States promised to do, to protect children?

Governments hold a lot of responsibility to protect children's right to a healthy environment. The General Comment tells governments that they have to take immediate action to protect children from all three environmental harms to protect children's rights.

It tells us that children's right to a healthy environment includes clean air, a safe climate, healthy ecosystems and biodiversity, safe water, healthy food and an environment free from toxic pollution. Some of these responsibilities include to:

- Respect, protect, and fulfil children's rights by taking action to make sure every child grows up in a healthy environment.
- Carry out regular Child Rights Impact Assessments to understand (and resolve) how their decisions about the environment will impact (or are impacting) children – paying special attention to how children of all ages and backgrounds might be impacted differently.
- Make sure businesses also respect children's rights by creating laws, regulations and policies to prevent companies from polluting the environment and harming children, and to make sure businesses don't hide their environmental impact.
- Make sure children are supported to access justice – that is, solutions, support and remedy for the harm and consequences they are experiencing – at all levels, from local communities to countries and internationally.



- Cooperate internationally, work together with other governments as environmental problems do not stop at a country's border. Countries that are most responsible for harming the environment that have the most resources should take more action than others, and support countries that are impacted the most.

Governments should also consider children's rights in all decisions made about the environment, and consider the environment in all decisions being made about children.

### What can child environmental activists and human rights defenders do?

It's important to remember that the weight of the world doesn't rest on children's shoulders, and that every person in the world can have a small but mighty role to play in protecting our planet. This is a choice, and all action must be completely voluntary and facilitated by supportive adults.

If you chose to stand up for a healthy environment and a healthy ocean, as child environmental activists and human rights defenders, it is helpful to know there are a few particularly important rights in the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child and the new General Comment which can help support children's voices being heard in decisions made about the environment and ocean.

- Article 12: Right to be heard: Children should be taken seriously by adults and have a say on issues related to the environment and climate change. Governments should involve children when making decisions about the environment and climate change, and make sure they give feedback to children about how their views were considered.
- Article 13 and 15: Right to freedom of expression, association and peaceful assembly: Children often stand up for their environmental rights as human rights defenders. Many children also spend time with friends and groups where



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they exchange information and ideas. Governments should support children to express themselves by providing safe and empowering spaces for them to do so. Governments should adopt laws to protect child human rights defenders.

- Articles 13 and 17: Access to information: Governments should make sure that children have access to clear, accurate environmental and climate-related information, including information about plans and decisions being made, and about actions that children can take themselves. Information should be shared in different ways so that children of different ages and backgrounds can understand it.

Children's efforts around the world to stand up for their environmental rights was the motivation for the General Comment, which was shaped by both adults and children around the world. This information sheet offers some extra guidance for child human rights defenders who wish to strengthen our voices and action on how important it is to also protect the ocean, with other children and the adults who support them too. However, this is first the responsibility of governments, and other adult allies working with and for children - including organisations, universities, and the [United Nations](#) – and has to be in partnership with those child agents of change who are holding them accountable for a better, fairer and more sustainable future.

**“Child human rights defenders, as agents of change, have made historic contributions to human rights and environmental protection. Their status should be recognized, and their demands for urgent and decisive measures to tackle global environmental harm should be realized.”**

