

POLICY BRIEF | 2026

Advancing Community-led Ocean Governance in Kenya

Local Priorities and Policy Actions for the 11th Our Ocean Conference (OOC11)

KEY MESSAGES

As the first African host of the Our Ocean Conference, Kenya has an unprecedented opportunity to champion a new model of ocean governance, one that places communities at the center of decision-making, strengthens ecosystem stewardship, and promotes equitable access to ocean benefits.

Governments, development partners, investors, civil society, research institutions, and the private sector are called upon to:

- **Increase investment in community-led ocean action.**
- **Scale successful local conservation and restoration initiatives.**
- **Strengthen governance, transparency, and accountability.**
- **Support sustainable livelihoods and climate resilience.**
- **Foster regional collaboration across the Western Indian Ocean.**



EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Kenya's ocean and coastal ecosystems underpin climate resilience, biodiversity conservation, food security, livelihoods, maritime trade, tourism, and the sustainable blue economy. These ecosystems support millions of people and contribute significantly to national and regional development. However, escalating climate impacts, marine pollution, declining fisheries, maritime insecurity, weak governance systems, and limited community participation continue to threaten the sustainability of these critical resources.

As Kenya hosts the 11th Our Ocean Conference (OOC11), the first-ever edition of the conference to be

held in Africa, there is a unique opportunity to place community-led ocean governance at the centre of global ocean action. Consultations conducted across Lamu, Tana River, Kilifi, Mombasa, and Kwale counties revealed a strong consensus: sustainable ocean management can only be achieved through increased investment, stronger governance, enhanced community participation, and equitable sharing of benefits arising from marine and coastal resources.

This policy brief presents priority actions emerging from coastal communities and stakeholders to inform Kenya's commitments at OOC11 and contribute to a more inclusive, resilient, and sustainable blue economy.

WHY THIS MATTERS

The Western Indian Ocean is one of the world's most productive marine ecosystems, yet it faces unprecedented pressures from climate change, pollution, biodiversity loss, illegal fishing, and competing ocean uses.

FOR KENYA:

- Over 70% of coastal households depend directly or indirectly on marine resources for their livelihoods.
- Coastal ecosystems provide critical protection against storms, flooding, and sea-level rise.
- Fisheries, tourism, maritime transport, and emerging blue economy sectors contribute significantly to national economic growth.
- Coastal communities remain among the most vulnerable to climate and economic shocks despite being key stewards of marine ecosystems.

Addressing these challenges requires placing local communities at the forefront of ocean governance while strengthening national and regional policy frameworks.

PRIORITY POLICY ACTIONS FOR OOC11

1. Accelerate Action Against Marine Pollution

Marine pollution—particularly plastic pollution and untreated wastewater—continues to

degrade marine ecosystems, threaten public health, undermine fisheries, and damage tourism economies.

KEY ACTIONS

- Scale up investment in decentralized waste management infrastructure, including Material Recovery Facilities and waste transfer stations in coastal communities.
- Modernize wastewater and sewage treatment systems to eliminate discharge of untreated effluent into rivers, beaches, creeks, and marine ecosystems.
- Strengthen implementation of the Sustainable Waste Management Act (2022) and Extended Producer Responsibility mechanisms.
- Establish a harmonized East African regional framework to address transboundary plastic pollution and strengthen data-sharing across countries.

OOC11 OPPORTUNITY

Mobilize new financing and partnerships for circular economy solutions, marine litter prevention, and coastal waste management systems.

2. Strengthen Marine Protected Areas and Community Conservation

Marine Protected Areas (MPAs), Locally Managed Marine Areas (LMMAs), conservancies, and community-managed conservation areas are critical for biodiversity conservation, fisheries recovery, and climate resilience. Despite progress, many protected and conserved areas remain underfunded and lack effective management systems.

KEY ACTIONS

- Increase financing for marine conservation and community awareness programmes.
- Legally recognize and digitally map boundaries of MPAs, LMMAs, and Joint Community Management Areas.
- Align marine conservation efforts with Kenya's National Marine Spatial Plan and regional frameworks such as the Nairobi Convention.
- Expand community benefit-sharing from

conservation revenues and strengthen local participation in conservation governance.

OOCl1 OPPORTUNITY

Advance the global commitment to protecting 30% of oceans by 2030 through greater investment in community-led conservation models.

3. Enhance Maritime Security and Ocean Governance

Maritime insecurity remains a challenge across the Western Indian Ocean through piracy, trafficking, illegal trade, and other transboundary crimes. Effective maritime governance is essential for protecting ocean resources, securing trade routes, and supporting sustainable economic growth.

KEY ACTIONS

- Expand community participation in maritime surveillance and reporting systems.
- Increase investment in maritime security infrastructure and regional cooperation.
- Strengthen anti-corruption measures and interagency coordination.
- Deploy advanced technologies, including satellite monitoring, artificial intelligence, and integrated intelligence-sharing platforms.

OOCl1 OPPORTUNITY

Strengthen regional maritime cooperation and invest in technology-driven ocean governance solutions.

4. Invest in Climate Resilience and Nature-Based Solutions

Climate change is already affecting coastal Kenya through flooding, sea-level rise, coral bleaching, coastal erosion, and ecosystem degradation.

Mangroves, seagrasses, and coral reefs provide critical natural protection but continue to face degradation and underinvestment.

KEY ACTIONS

- Increase national and county-level climate and environmental financing.

- Scale up restoration of mangroves, seagrass and other blue carbon ecosystems.
- Improve community access to natural resource user rights and climate adaptation support.
- Expand public awareness on climate policy, carbon markets, and ocean governance.

OOCl1 OPPORTUNITY

Position blue carbon ecosystems as a cornerstone of climate adaptation, mitigation, and sustainable development investments.

5. Secure Sustainable Fisheries and Coastal Food Systems

Small-scale fisheries are fundamental to food security, employment, and poverty reduction along Kenya's coast. However, fish stocks continue to decline due to Illegal, Unreported and Unregulated (IUU) fishing, habitat degradation, and weak governance.

KEY ACTIONS

- Secure tenure and legal recognition of fish landing sites.
- Strengthen coordination among fisheries, wildlife, forestry, environmental, and maritime agencies.
- Increase investment in sustainable aquaculture and mariculture enterprises.
- Establish integrated fisheries service centres to improve service delivery and compliance.
- Strengthen surveillance systems, enforcement capacity, and interagency coordination to combat illegal fishing effectively
- Strengthen collaborative fisheries management models that support ecosystem restoration, sustainable fishing practices, and long-term protection of fish stocks.

OOCl1 OPPORTUNITY

Promote sustainable fisheries management that simultaneously supports food security, livelihoods, and marine biodiversity conservation.



6. Build an Inclusive and Equitable Blue Economy

Kenya's Blue Economy offers significant opportunities for economic transformation. However, many coastal communities continue to face exclusion from decisionmaking processes and unequal access to benefits.

Women, youth, Indigenous communities, and persons with disabilities remain underrepresented in blue economy investments and governance structures.

KEY ACTIONS

- Institutionalize Free, Prior and Informed Consent (FPIC) in all major ocean-based developments.
- Protect small-scale fishers from displacement associated with large-scale blue economy investments.

- Expand financing for community enterprises and youth-led marine businesses.
- Ensure meaningful representation of women, youth, and marginalized groups in policy and decision-making processes.
- Strengthen public-private partnerships that balance economic growth with environmental sustainability and social equity.

OOC11 OPPORTUNITY

Promote inclusive blue economy development to deliver economic growth while safeguarding ecosystems and community rights.

Prepared by
The East African Wild Life Society
Riara Road, Off Ngong Road Kilimani,
P.O Box 20110- 00200 Nairobi, Kenya
M: +254 722202473 | www.eawildlife.org