



**INTERGOVERNMENTAL OCEANOGRAPHIC COMMISSION
(of UNESCO)**

**Sixteenth Intergovernmental Session of the IOC Sub-
Commission for the Western Pacific (WESTPAC-XVI)
Hangzhou, China, 10-12 November 2026**

Agenda 3.1

**Statement of the Chairperson, including Key Governance, Policy and
Strategic Developments**

Prof. Dato' Dr. Aileen Tan Shau Hwai, Chairperson

1. Distinguished delegates, colleagues and friends,

2. Twenty months ago in Tokyo, you entrusted me with the chairing of this Sub-Commission. I have spent much of that time listening: to scientists in the field and the laboratory, to officials balancing many priorities, and to young ocean professionals who will carry this work long after us. This statement is not a list of everything that has happened since we last met. The documents before you do that well. Instead, I want to share where I believe WESTPAC stands, where the region is heading, and what we must decide together to get there.

1. From decisions to delivery

3. Tokyo was a session of ambition. We adopted the Tokyo Statement, a Regional Action Framework for Marine Spatial Planning to 2030, new working groups on seagrass and on blue carbon ecosystem restoration, new projects on ecosystem prediction and on methane fluxes, a Support Office for the second Cooperative Study of the Kuroshio and adjacent regions, and task forces on BBNJ and on ocean literacy.

4. I am proud to say that every one of these bodies has now met and begun its work. Seagrass experts from ten countries gathered in Phuket and are preparing a regional outlook and restoration guide. More than 150 participants in Xiamen agreed on a regional mangrove restoration guidebook and demonstration sites. Ten Member States are putting the Marine Spatial Planning framework into practice. The Ocean Literacy Task Force has agreed a regional baseline. And this year, more than fifty participants from eleven Member States were trained in environmental DNA, with pilot monitoring planned in seagrass, coral and mangrove habitats.

5. These are not small things. They show that WESTPAC is no longer only a forum where countries meet. It has become a place where countries work, side by side, on shared problems. That shift, from convening to delivering, is the foundation on which our next steps must be built.

2. A changing world, a turning point for our region

6. The world around us has moved quickly. The Third UN Ocean Conference in Nice gave us the Nice Ocean Action Plan and more than 800 voluntary commitments. In January this year, the Agreement on Marine Biodiversity of Areas beyond National Jurisdiction entered into force. The Ocean Decade has passed its midpoint, and the IOC is now asking itself what it must become after 2030.

7. For the Western Pacific, these are not distant developments. Our region holds the world's richest marine biodiversity, some of its busiest seas, and hundreds of millions of people whose food, livelihoods and safety depend on the ocean. We also sit on the front line of warming waters, sea-level rise, coastal hazards and biodiversity loss. What happens in our seas matters to the whole planet. That gives us both a responsibility and an opportunity: to lead by example in showing how ocean science can serve society.

3. Four strategic directions for the years ahead

8. Looking towards 2030 and beyond, I would invite the Sub-Commission to focus on four directions.

9. First, science that leads to solutions. Our working groups on seagrass, mangroves and blue carbon, our work on marine spatial planning and on harmful algal blooms and coral reefs, should be judged not only by the papers they produce but by the decisions they inform. I encourage every programme to ask a simple question: who will use this, and how? Restoration that is guided by sound science, and planning that is grounded in good data, are among the most valuable things we can offer our governments.

10. Second, observations, data and new technologies. Our Advisory Group has rightly pointed to artificial intelligence and big data as areas we cannot ignore. Tools such as environmental DNA, ocean prediction systems and shared data platforms are changing how we watch over the ocean. WESTPAC can help make sure that every Member State, not only those with the largest research budgets, can benefit from them. Shared standards, open data and joint training will matter as much as new instruments.

11. Third, capacity for the BBNJ era. The entry into force of the BBNJ Agreement brings new obligations and new possibilities, from environmental impact assessments to area-based management and the sharing of marine genetic resources. Many of our Member States will need scientific capacity, technology and trained people to take part fully. Our BBNJ Task Force gives us a starting point. I believe WESTPAC can become a trusted regional partner for this work, rooted in science and respectful of each country's priorities.

12. Fourth, people and ocean literacy. Every achievement I have described rests on people. We must invest in our early career ocean professionals, open doors for women in ocean science, and build ocean literacy so that communities, schools and decision-makers understand why the ocean matters to their daily lives. The Ocean Literacy Task Force and the global Ocean Literacy Plan of Action give us a framework. Our task is to bring it to life in our own languages and contexts.

4. Strengthening our own house

13. I must speak frankly about our foundations. Our programmes have grown from about a dozen to some thirty in less than a decade, and our ambitions continue to rise. Yet our WESTPAC Office in Bangkok remains a small team carrying a very large load. My predecessors raised this concern, and I raise it again today, because it has not gone away. Ambition without capacity is not sustainable.

14. I therefore appeal to Member States to consider how they can strengthen the Office, whether through secondments, extra-budgetary contributions, hosting of activities or in-kind support. Equally, I encourage our partners, including regional bodies, funding agencies, the private sector and philanthropy, to see WESTPAC as a reliable channel for regional ocean cooperation. The draft Regional Blueprint and the workplan and budget for 2028 and 2029 before you are our chance to align our ambitions with the means to deliver them.

5. The Western Pacific voice in the future of the IOC

15. This session will also contribute to IOC and the Future of the Ocean. I hope we approach that discussion with confidence. Our region has much to offer: strong national institutions, long traditions of regional cooperation, and a record of turning science into action. We should be clear about what we need from the IOC: a stronger regional presence, predictable support for capacity development, and recognition of the role sub-commissions play in delivering the IOC's mission on the ground. We should be equally clear about what we can give in return.

6. Looking ahead

16. Next April, the Philippines will host the 12th WESTPAC International Marine Science Conference together with the Third UN Ocean Decade Regional Conference. This will be a defining moment for our region in the final stretch of the Decade. I invite every Member State to take part fully, to bring your scientists, your young professionals and your policymakers, and to use this gathering to show what the Western Pacific has achieved and what it still aims to do.

17. Dear colleagues, the ocean does not recognise our borders, and none of us can understand or protect it alone. That has always been the spirit of WESTPAC. Let us keep communicating, keep co-designing, and keep delivering, so that the science we create together becomes the ocean future our people deserve. Thank you.