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# OCEAN STEWARDSHIP: AT THE CROSSROADS OF ETHICS, GOVERNANCE, AND STRATEGY

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Directed by Julia Tasse, Senior Research Fellow at IRIS, the Ocean programme is a transdisciplinary research department that studies the geopolitics of the sea, ocean governance, and the security implications of changes to marine environments caused by climate change.

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## WHY SPEAK OF OCEAN STEWARDSHIP?

The ocean occupies a pivotal role in the world's ecological, economic and geopolitical equilibrium. It shapes climate dynamics, underpins global trade, and constitutes a vast reservoir of natural resources. Yet, growing anthropogenic pressures are undermining its resilience, along with the stability of the systems that depend on it. Climate change is profoundly altering its physical and chemical properties, contributing to rising sea levels and ocean acidification. At the same time, the industrialisation of fisheries and the expansion of offshore operational capacities —particularly in areas beyond national jurisdiction— are accelerating the exploitation of marine resources.

In the face of these challenges, **ocean governance remains challenged, torn between the prerogatives of national sovereignty and the weaknesses of international frameworks**, which remain sectoral and fragmented<sup>1</sup>. The law of the sea struggles to provide effective oversight of maritime spaces beyond national jurisdictions. Ongoing negotiations on the governance of the high seas illustrate the **difficulty of achieving institutional coherence**, as well as the complex interplay between states, international organisations and private actors in the formulation of effective and coherent standards.

It is against this backdrop that the concept of **ocean stewardship**<sup>2</sup> has emerged. Yet the term is far from univocal<sup>3</sup>: scientists interpret it as an ecosystem-based framework; international institutions promote it as a guiding principle for sustainable management, while maritime industries mobilise it as part of their corporate social responsibility strategies. This diversity of interpretation is not without consequence, raising questions about the coherence of these approaches – **a coherence that is essential if the concept is to serve as an effective lever for action**. Ocean stewardship currently oscillates between a scientific **framework for understanding** ecosystem dynamics, a **normative compass**, and a voluntary regulatory tool. Despite its growing use, it remains a fluid concept, leaving it **vulnerable to opportunistic appropriation, thereby undermining its potential impact**.

<sup>1</sup> Julien Rochette, "Gouvernance internationale de l'océan : un cadre fragmenté" in Agathe Euzen, Françoise Gail, Denis Lacroix and Philippe Cury (ed.), *L'Océan à découvert* (Paris: CNRS Éditions, 2017): 252-3.

<sup>2</sup> Nathan J. Bennett *et al.*, "Environmental Stewardship: A Conceptual Review and Analytical Framework", *Environmental Management* 61, no 4 (January 2018) 597-614. See also: Raphaël Mathevet, François Bousquet and Christopher M. Raymond, "The Concept of Stewardship in Sustainability Science and Conservation Biology", *Biological Conservation* 217 (November 2017): 363-70.

<sup>3</sup> Jennifer Welcham, "A Defence of Environmental Stewardship", *Environmental Values* 21, no 3 (July 2012) : 297-316.

This note therefore aims to clarify the different understandings of the term, identify areas of convergence and divergence among key actors, and propose an operational definition that could elevate stewardship from rhetorical discourse to a **functional instrument of maritime governance**.

## A PRINCIPLE AT THE CROSSROADS OF CONSERVATION, GOVERNANCE AND ECONOMIC STRATEGY

Although increasingly present in scientific, political and corporate discourse, **the concept of ocean stewardship remains multifaceted and subject to varying interpretations**. Its interpretation varies depending on the actors who adopt it, and no universally accepted, stable definition has yet emerged.

This multiplicity of meanings reflects the complexity of ocean governance itself and the tensions that arise between conservation and exploitation. Broadly speaking, three main interpretations can be identified: a **scientific approach**, focusing on the resilience of marine ecosystems and ocean-dependent societies; an **institutional approach**, treating stewardship as an instrument for integrated, collective management; and an **economic and strategic approach**, primarily adopted by the private sector.

### *The scientific perspective: an ecosystem-based, ethical approach*

In environmental sciences<sup>4</sup>, stewardship is above all understood as an **ecosystem-based and holistic framework**<sup>5</sup>. It rests on the principle of ensuring the resilience of ecosystems in the face of human-induced pressures, recognising the deep interdependence between natural dynamics and human activity. This approach is structured around several key foundations:

- An **ecosystem-based mode of governance** and an **integrated vision of the ocean** that bridges environmental and societal considerations, moving beyond the rigid, compartmentalised management of maritime spaces.
- A **collective and intergenerational responsibility**, grounded in the principles of environmental justice and equity, with a commitment to ensuring the long-term sustainability of marine ecosystems.

<sup>4</sup> This primarily refers to researchers in ecology, marine science, and environmental social sciences, as well as research institutions and academic centres specialising in the study of ocean resilience and marine socio-ecosystems

<sup>5</sup> F.Stuart Chapin, III, Gary P. Kofinas and Carl Folke (ed.), *Principles of Ecosystem Stewardship: Resilience-Based Natural Resource Management in a Changing World*. (New York: Springer Verlag, 2009).

- The **inclusion of ecological, social and economic benefits** provided by the ocean, approached through a **transdisciplinary lens** that combines natural sciences, social sciences and international law.
- The **recognition of local and Indigenous knowledge**, traditional practices and empirical observations.

This scientific interpretation of ocean stewardship forms the backbone of debates on the responsible management of the marine environment. Yet it often **collides with political and economic imperatives that continue to shape maritime resource exploitation, limiting its influence on policy and decision-making frameworks and its practical implementation.**

### ***Ocean stewardship as a framework for international governance***

At the institutional level<sup>6</sup>, ocean stewardship is **increasingly integrated into the international governance architecture**, expressed through multilateral conventions and sustainable development policies. In this context, it is seen as a tool for structuring collective commitments, regulating uses of the ocean, and ensuring its sustainable management. Despite its gradual integration into international frameworks<sup>7</sup>, **the concept remains insufficiently formalised**. Its institutional interpretation encompasses several key dimensions:

- The **management of the ocean as a “Global Common”**, promoting a collective vision that transcends narrow national interests.
- The **fostering of accountability** among states and economic actors alike.
- The **promotion of a sustainable blue economy**, seeking to balance ecosystem preservation with rational and responsible resource exploitation.
- The **regulation of maritime activities** through multilateral cooperation.

Yet this institutional approach **often struggles to translate into concrete policy**. The diversity of legal regimes governing maritime spaces, the fragmentation of ocean governance, and divergent state interests all weaken the practical application of stewardship principles on a global scale. Multilateral negotiations are frequently protracted, and the resulting commitments are often non-binding or adjustable to the discretion of parties, limiting their capacity to foster real change.

<sup>6</sup> The term “institutional actors” here refers primarily to states, international organisations – such as the United Nations, the International Maritime Organization (IMO), UNESCO through its Intergovernmental Oceanographic Commission (IOC), or the International Seabed Authority (ISA), for example – as well as regional or specialised agencies involved in ocean governance.

<sup>7</sup> For example, in the context of the Agreement under the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea on the conservation and sustainable use of marine biological diversity of areas beyond national jurisdiction, also known as the BBNJ Agreement. See box below.

### *A strategic and economic tool for the private sector*

In the corporate sphere<sup>8</sup>, ocean stewardship **most commonly features within broader corporate social responsibility strategies**. For many maritime businesses, it constitutes both a reputational asset and a means of responding to rising expectations from investors, regulators and consumers. The idea of a **sustainable blue economy** – one that supports responsible use of the ocean and its resources – is **increasingly seen as a driver of economic value**. Among private sector actors, this takes several forms:

- The use of stewardship language as a **reputational marker**, designed to reassure investors and appeal to environmentally conscious consumers.
- **Voluntary commitments** aimed at reducing the environmental footprint of maritime activities.
- Investments in **blue economy projects** positioning companies as sustainability leaders.
- The adoption of **environmental labels and certifications** to signal responsible behaviour, often with limited regulatory oversight.

In multiplying such initiatives, maritime businesses are helping to **disseminate the concept of ocean stewardship** and gradually embed it in their operational strategies. These voluntary commitments serve not only ethical concerns but also strategic imperatives, as reputational risks and investor scrutiny increase<sup>9</sup>. Yet, in the absence of robust and binding standards, this trend risks **diluting the concept, encouraging superficial commitments or ‘bluewashing’**, and ultimately **undermining the transformative potential that stewardship could embody**.

These commonalities reflect a **shared recognition of the imperative to safeguard the ocean** against mounting anthropogenic pressures and accelerating climate change. Yet, the absence of conceptual convergence between these different approaches continues to **undermine the coherence and effectiveness of stewardship as a governance tool**. In this respect, clarifying the core meaning of the concept and defining its scope are essential to fostering consistent implementation across institutional, economic and environmental frameworks.

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<sup>8</sup> This refers primarily to companies and industrial groups operating in sectors related to the exploitation, transport, valorisation or conservation of marine resources, as well as financial actors and investors involved in the development of a sustainable blue economy.

<sup>9</sup> UN Global Compact, Sustainable Ocean Principles, 2020

Convergences across the three approaches:

- A growing recognition of the need for **sustainable and responsible** management of the ocean.
- The importance of **collective**, multi-stakeholder approaches that bring together states, international organisations, the scientific community and private actors.
- The gradual integration of **social and climate** considerations into ocean governance frameworks.
- The development of **tools**, standards and reference frameworks aimed at structuring action.

**Tableau : Ocean stewardship: objectives, constraints and implementation mechanisms**

	Scientific dimension	Institutional dimension	Private sector
<b>Objectives</b>	Ensure the resilience of <b>marine ecosystems</b> and safeguard biodiversity in the face of anthropogenic and climatic pressures.	Strike a <b>balance</b> between the exploitation and protection of marine resources through multilateral governance frameworks.	Adapt economic models to environmental imperatives while <b>preserving competitiveness and profitability</b>
<b>Nature of commitments</b>	Grounded in ecological principles and scientific evidence, advocating for <b>strict and binding</b> regulatory measures.	Dependent on <b>multilateral negotiations</b> and the balance of power between states, with commitments that are often progressive and adaptable.	Largely <b>voluntary</b> in nature, shaped by investor pressure, consumer expectations, and evolving market trends
<b>Associated constraints and risks</b>	Challenging to implement, given political and economic trade-offs; <b>lacks coercive</b>	Hindered by conflicting state interests, the slow pace of diplomatic processes, and the	Requires constant trade-offs between profitability and sustainability; <b>susceptible to</b>



	<b>mechanisms to enforce</b> scientific recommendations.	<b>heterogeneity of legal regimes</b> , all of which limit the practical application of commitments.	<b>opportunistic practices</b> (such as greenwashing) in the absence of binding frameworks.
<b>Implementation mechanisms</b>	Involves <b>scientific monitoring</b> of ecosystems, the production of data, and the formulation of recommendations to guide policy decisions.	Implemented through <b>international agreements</b> , environmental treaties, and public policies regulating maritime activities.	Operationalised through <b>environmental labelling schemes</b> , corporate social responsibility strategies, financing of ‘sustainable’ initiatives, and the integration of ESG (Environmental, Social, and Governance) standards.

## TOWARDS A DEFINITION OF OCEAN STEWARDSHIP: FOUNDATIONS AND CHALLENGES

Ocean stewardship can thus be understood as an **ethical and practical commitment to the responsible and sustainable care of the ocean**, designed to preserve its health, biodiversity and resources for present and future generations. However, its translation into other languages and policy frameworks proves challenging.<sup>10</sup> The English term *stewardship* carries **ethical, ecological and governance dimensions that no simple equivalent fully captures**. The term stewardship also encompasses notions of responsibility and the duty of care inherent in the active and committed management of a common good<sup>11</sup>. Renderings closer to *management* risk reducing it to technical administration, devoid of its normative and moral weight.

<sup>10</sup> Raphaël Mathevet et al., “Environmental Stewardship and Ecological Solidarity : Rethinking Social-Ecological Interdependency and Responsibility”, *Journal of Agricultural and Environmental Ethics* 31, no 5 (October 2018): 605-23.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*



More than a management framework, stewardship embodies a voluntary commitment to ensuring the resilience of marine ecosystems, promoting equitable and sustainable use of ocean resources, and integrating social and climate considerations<sup>12</sup>. It is both an individual and collective ethical commitment to safeguard the ocean from human and environmental pressures.

This definition captures the essence of stewardship and highlights its distinctiveness in comparison to other approaches to ocean management<sup>13</sup>. It stands out through several key features that underpin its specificity and relevance as a framework for integrated and responsible ocean governance. Among these, five fundamental dimensions warrant particular attention:

- **An ecosystem-based and systemic approach**, going beyond the fragmented, sectoral logic that too often characterises maritime governance. Stewardship requires an integrated perspective that acknowledges the interdependence between ocean dynamics and human societies, viewing the ocean as a unified, dynamic system shaped by ecological, economic and climatic interdependencies.
- **Intergenerational equity and sustainable use**, affirming that ocean management cannot be reduced to short-term interests – whether of states or industries. Stewardship implies safeguarding the regenerative capacity of ecosystems and their contribution to biological and climatic balance, ensuring their integrity over the long term.
- **A dual voluntary and collective commitment**, built on the active participation of all stakeholders. The strength of stewardship lies in its capacity to foster shared responsibility, going beyond legal obligations to foster a culture of meaningful engagement and ethical accountability.
- **Accountability as a condition of legitimacy and effectiveness**<sup>14</sup>, understood not merely as moral responsibility but as an obligation to justify actions, ensure transparency and demonstrate results. Accountability fosters trust between stakeholders and ensures that stewardship commitments are more than rhetorical exercises.
- **A cognitive and emotional dimension**, reflecting a conscious, direct relationship between the steward and the environment they protect. Stewardship involves not only

<sup>12</sup> Raphaël Mathevet et al., *Journal of Agricultural and Environmental Ethics* 31, *op.cit.*

<sup>13</sup> Nathan J. Bennet et al., *op.cit.*

<sup>14</sup> Jennifer Welchman, *op. cit.*

rational understanding but also an affective commitment, a sense of belonging and duty towards the marine world, grounded in knowledge and respect for its complexity.

Taken together, these dimensions elevate ocean stewardship beyond environmental regulation. It becomes an **integrated, ethical and participatory approach** that calls for the **reappropriation of the relationship between human societies and the ocean**, rooted in responsibility, solidarity and care.

### ***« Desiring to act as stewards of the ocean... » – A term enshrined in the BBNJ Treaty***

The term steward of the ocean appears in the preamble of the High Seas Biodiversity Treaty (Biodiversity Beyond National Jurisdiction – BBNJ). Its inclusion signals recognition of stewardship as a structuring principle for maritime governance. However, its wording remains deliberately vague, avoiding the imposition of binding obligations on states. This lack of a consolidated definition renders the concept more of a rhetorical device than a structured lever for action. Rather than clarifying its operational scope, the reference to stewardship in this high-level text underscores the diversity of interpretations, and illustrates the difficulty of embedding the concept within a still-fragmented international maritime governance architecture.

### ***A concept that defies easy translation***

The concept of stewardship poses difficulties when translated across languages, reflecting its complexity and cultural specificity. In the French and Spanish versions of the BBNJ Treaty, the term has been rendered as “ensuring the proper management of the ocean”, a formulation that reduces stewardship to a more functional, administrative notion. This choice of language risks stripping the concept of its normative and ethical richness.

Other linguistic adaptations highlight further nuances:

- In Arabic, the term used (قَائِم) refers to a guardian or custodian — someone entrusted with continuous oversight and protection. This conveys an active responsibility and a moral duty to safeguard, aligning with the protective dimension of stewardship.

- In Russian, the chosen term (распорядитель) translates as “manager” or “administrator”, emphasising organisational responsibility and regulatory authority. This interpretation leans towards a technocratic reading of stewardship, focusing on oversight and control.
- In Chinese, the term used (守护者) means “guardian” or “protector”, underscoring the active role of protection and preservation, with an embedded moral dimension. This translation shifts away from the managerial aspect and instead foregrounds the steward’s continuous and conscious duty to safeguard something precious.

These variations reveal the conceptual elasticity of stewardship, as well as the difficulty of capturing its full ethical, ecological and governance implications in languages and frameworks that may privilege administrative or managerial interpretations. Ultimately, this linguistic fluidity reflects the broader challenge of translating the idea of stewardship into effective, actionable governance on a global scale.

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