

CONCEPT NOTE

An Ocean of Humanity: Shared Vulnerability, Shared Solidarity Launch Conference of the UNESCO Chair Ocean and Sustainable Coasts La Rochelle University, 28-30 April 2026

Background and Rationale

The relationship between humanity and the Ocean system is undergoing profound transformation. Climate change, biodiversity loss, increasing pressures on coastal zones, and growing socio-ecological inequalities are reshaping both marine ecosystems and human societies. At the same time, governance frameworks, scientific knowledge and societal representations are struggling to keep pace with the scale and complexity of these changes.

In this context, the launch conference of the UNESCO Chair " Ocean and Sustainable Coasts" (*Océan et littoral durable*) aims to provide a structured space for reflection, dialogue and co-construction around the future of humanity–ocean relations. Hosted by La Rochelle University, the conference builds on strong expertise in coastal vulnerability, ocean governance and interdisciplinary ocean sciences, developed through national and international research cooperation. Importantly, the conference is conceived as an active contribution to UNESCO's Decade of Ocean Science for Sustainable Development (2021–2030), which calls for enhanced ocean science, improved science-policy interfaces, and greater engagement of all stakeholders, particularly Youth, in shaping sustainable Ocean futures.

The conference is grounded in the conviction that responding to ocean-related challenges requires not only robust scientific and legal frameworks, but also renewed imaginaries, intergenerational dialogue and a stronger interface between science, society and decision-making.

Objectives of the Conference

The conference pursues four complementary objectives:

- *Scientific objectives*

To mobilise interdisciplinary scientific knowledge (natural sciences, social sciences, law and engineering) to better understand ocean systems, coastal vulnerabilities and governance challenges, and to demonstrate how ocean science generates innovation and adaptive capacity.

- *Educational and intergenerational objectives*

To engage young generations (secondary school pupils, students) as active participants in the reflection process, acknowledging their role as future decision-makers and primary stakeholders of long-term ocean transformations. This engagement responds directly to UNESCO's commitment to education and youth empowerment in the context of the Decade of Ocean Science.

- *Governance and policy objectives*

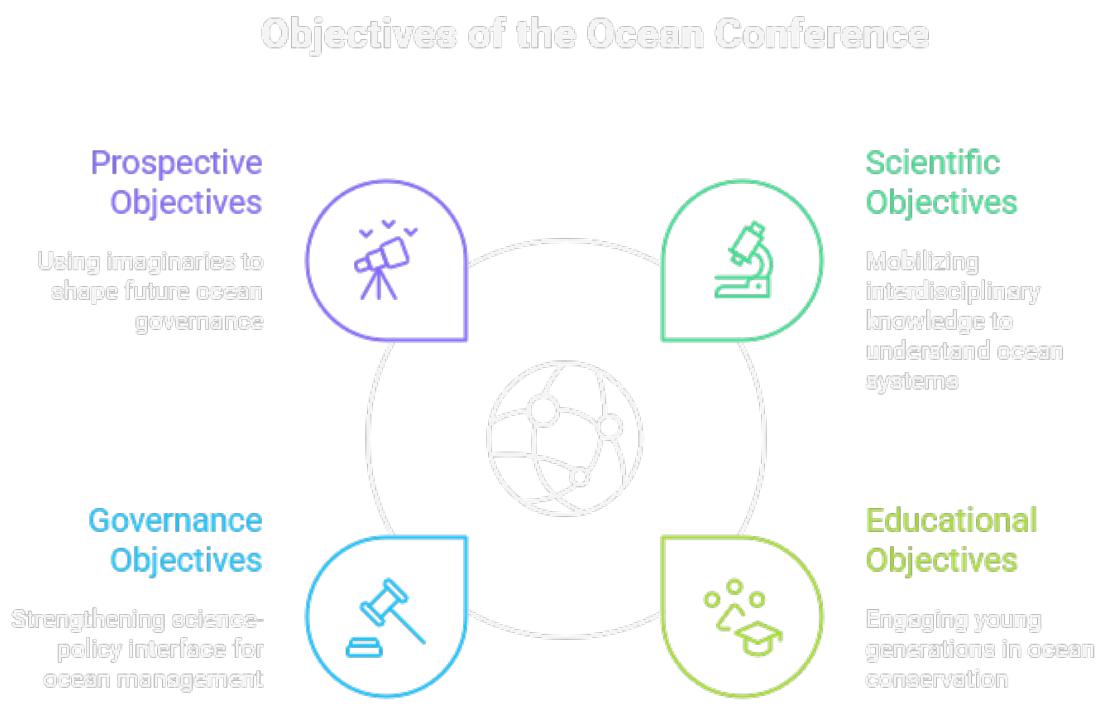
To explore how scientific knowledge, legal instruments and governance mechanisms can support more just, anticipatory and adaptive responses to coastal and ocean-related risks, while strengthening the science-policy interface at local, national and international levels.

- *Prospective objectives*

To use imaginaries, narratives and forward-looking approaches as tools to rethink Ocean futures, inform long-term public decision-making, and co-create visions of transformative ocean governance aligned with principles of ecological solidarity and intergenerational justice.

Conceptual Framework

The concept of the conference is structured around three interdependent pillars:



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1. *Scientific knowledge and legal frameworks*

The conference draws on established scientific knowledge of Ocean systems and coastal dynamics, combined with international legal and governance frameworks (UNCLOS, CBD and Kunming-Montreal Framework, International Maritime Organization conventions, Marine Strategy Framework Directive, Regional Seas Programmes, regional instruments, etc.).

Attention is paid to emerging principles of climate justice, environmental justice and intergenerational equity. This framework recognises that good Ocean governance must integrate rigorous empirical knowledge with normative commitments to fairness and sustainability.

2. Intergenerational dialogue

Young generations are not considered passive recipients of knowledge, but active contributors capable of questioning assumptions, proposing alternative visions and enriching scientific and policy debates. This dialogue reflects the urgency of addressing transformations that will materialise within the next two decades, a timeframe that uniquely concerns those currently under 35 years of age.

In this sense, the conference operationalises UNESCO's principle of youth participation in decision-making on matters affecting their futures (1989 Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC), Recommendation on Youth (1992), 1997 UNESCO Declaration on the Responsibilities of the Present Generations Towards Future Generations, 2018 UN Youth Strategy "Youth2030", UNESCO's Youth Strategy (2014–2021), etc.).

3. Prospective imaginaries and transformation pathways

Imaginaries and narratives are approached as strategic resources that shape collective representations and policy choices. By reconnecting science, ethics and responsibility towards future generations, the conference seeks to open pathways for transformative Ocean governance that go beyond incremental adaptation toward systemic change.

Conference Structure and Methodology

The conference combines multiple formats designed to balance scientific rigor and accessibility:

- *Thematic round tables* led by senior researchers, legal experts and practitioners, structured around key challenges in ocean governance and coastal sustainability;
- Youth-led video capsules and direct exchanges enabling young participants to articulate their concerns and questions to scientific communities;
- *Interdisciplinary dialogue* integrating scientific, legal, technical and cultural perspectives to reveal connections across disciplines;
- *Demonstrations and applied research showcases* illustrating how scientific innovation translates into real-world solutions for coastal communities;
- **intergenerational working sessions** fostering peer-to-peer learning and co-production of knowledge.

This methodology aims to foster co-construction, cross-fertilisation of knowledge and meaningful engagement between disciplines, generations and institutions, consistent with UNESCO's commitment to science as a public good and inclusive knowledge production.

Key Thematic Axes

Four transversal themes structure the programme:

1. *Trajectories of vulnerability and climate justice*

Analysis of coastal vulnerabilities, exposure to cumulative climate and environmental risks, and intergenerational responsibilities. This axis explores how scientific understanding of vulnerability can inform more equitable and anticipatory policy responses.

2. *Adaptive capacities and governance mechanisms*

Exploration of legal, technical and institutional tools supporting adaptation and resilience. Emphasis is placed on comparing different governance models and on identifying barriers and enablers of effective coastal management.

3. *Central role of ocean sciences*

Ocean sciences as drivers of anticipation, prevention and informed decision-making. This axis highlights how marine research, technological innovation and real-time observation systems contribute to building societal resilience.

4. *Socio-Ecological solidarity and transformation of ways of life*

Rethinking Human-Ocean relations through renewed modes of living, using and governing coastal and marine realms. This axis addresses the cultural, social and ethical dimensions of sustainability, recognising that transformation requires shifts in values, practices and collective imaginaries.

Expected Outcomes

The conference aims to deliver several concrete outcomes:

- Strengthened dialogue between science, society and public decision-makers at multiple scales;
- Shared analytical frameworks on coastal vulnerability, ocean governance and climate justice, accessible to diverse audiences;
- Increased visibility of youth perspectives in ocean-related debates and policy-making processes;
- A Youth Declaration addressed to UNESCO and international governance bodies, expressing the expectations, responsibilities and visions of younger generations for ocean sustainability;
- Documented proceedings and policy briefs synthesising key insights for dissemination to research and policy communities;
- Institutional partnerships strengthened for ongoing collaboration on ocean science, education and governance.

Added Value of the UNESCO Chair

Aligned with the mandates of the UNESCO Chair "Sustainable Ocean and Coasts" (Océan et littoral durable), the conference contributes directly to UNESCO priorities and the Decade of Ocean Science for Sustainable Development by:

- Promoting interdisciplinary science that bridges natural sciences, social sciences, law and engineering, recognising the complexity of ocean systems;
- Advancing ocean science literacy among youth and diverse stakeholders, building capacity for informed participation in ocean governance;
- Strengthening international cooperation among researchers, institutions and policymakers through structured dialogue and knowledge exchange;
- Embedding intergenerational justice at the core of ocean governance debates, ensuring that science informs equitable and sustainable decision-making;
- Positioning the Chair as a platform for long-term reflection, collective responsibility and collaborative action towards just, adaptive and transformative ocean futures.

The conference thereby operationalises the UNESCO Chair's commitment to fostering excellence in ocean science, equitable ocean governance and stewardship of shared marine resources for the benefit of present and future generations.