



**A Partner
Collaboration**

**Science, Policy, and Communities
in the Western Indian Ocean**

In this issue, regional partners highlight their contributions to the United Nations Ocean Decade, focusing on transformative actions for a clean, healthy, safe, and sustainably managed ocean. The 13th WIOMSA Symposium celebrates our achievements across various themes and emphasizes the importance of collective efforts in addressing critical challenges.

Discover more in this collaborative article featuring insights from partners across the WIO region.

The 13th WIOMSA Scientific Symposium gathers the Western Indian Ocean (WIO) community under the vision of One Ocean, One Future. This vision echoes the call of the United Nations Ocean Decade for transformative action towards a clean, healthy, safe, and sustainably managed ocean that inspires and engages humanity. For the WIO, it is as much a roadmap as it is an aspiration. The region's coral reefs, mangroves, seagrass meadows, and wetlands host extraordinary biodiversity and sustain millions of people with food, income, and coastal protection. Yet these natural assets are under mounting strain from climate change, overfishing, and development pressures.

The Symposium is both a celebration of what has been achieved and a reminder of what is at stake.

SCIENCE AS A FOUNDATION FOR DECISION-MAKING

Working closely with key stakeholders, **CORDIO** has led National Coral Reef Assessments (NCRAs) across Kenya, Tanzania, Mozambique, Madagascar and Comoros. This follows its pilot of the IUCN Red List of Ecosystems (RLE) framework for coral reefs in the Western Indian Ocean, conducted in collaboration with over 35 institutions. The assessment established that coral reefs in the WIO are at risk of collapse. The NCRAs are now deepening this analysis at the national level, using inclusive, co-developed methods to support more targeted conservation, improve reporting against global biodiversity goals, and strengthen reef resilience for the future



The CORDIO team with coral reef management stakeholders from the Comoros, earlier this year - Photo by Jeanne Henry

In the **Northern Mozambique Channel**, **WWF** and partners worked with **five coastal governments to co-develop a Marine Spatial Planning (MSP) Roadmap and Technical Guidelines**. The initiative underpins a regional goal to restore and sustainably manage more than 87,000 hectares of critical land- and seascapes and earned the Channel recognition as a United Nations World Restoration Flagship in 2025.



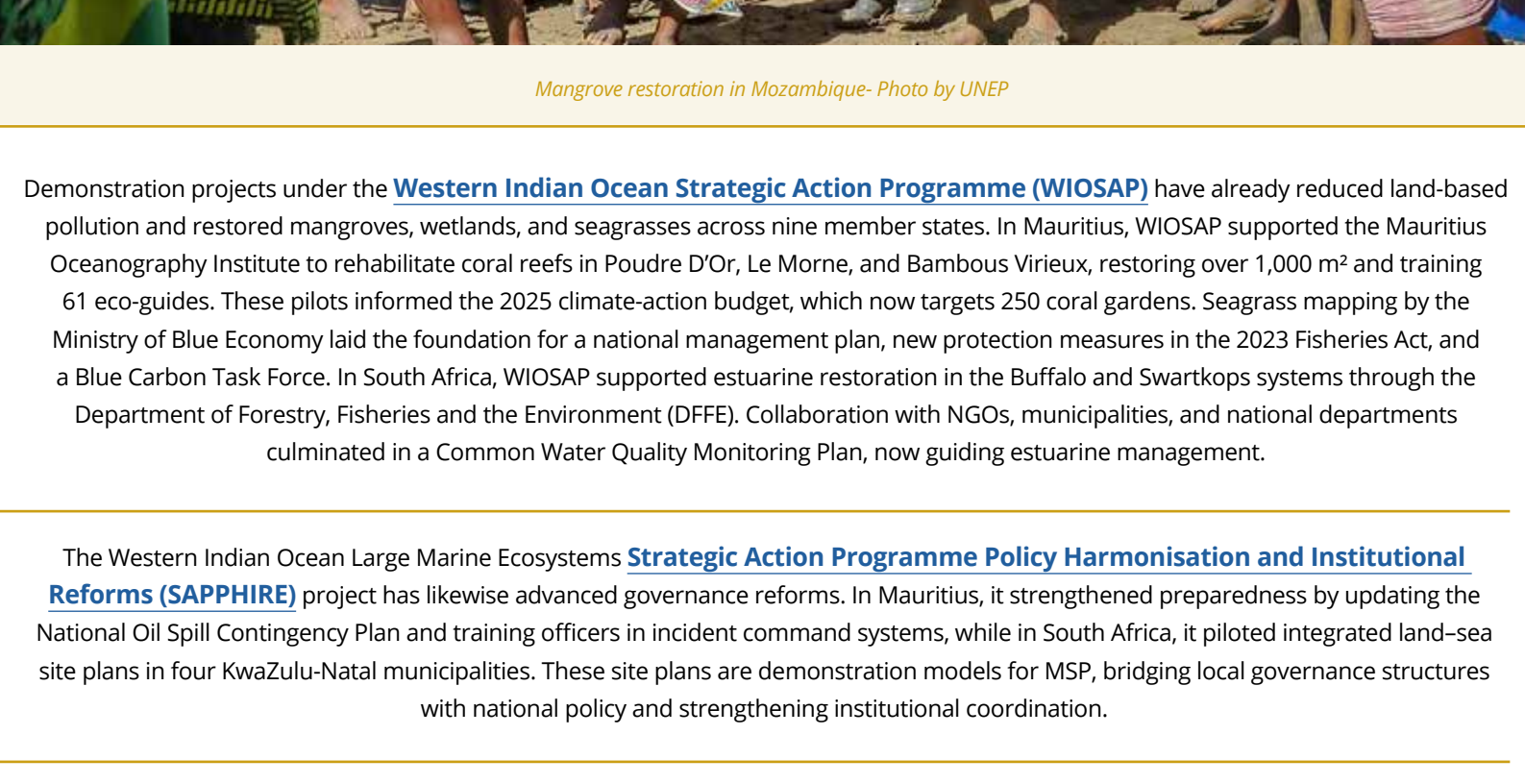
Senegal Training 2025- Photo by Global Fishing Watch

The **Large-Scale Seagrass Mapping and Management Initiative (LaSMMI)**, funded by the **Pew Charitable Trusts** and implemented with **WIOMSA** and national research institutions in **Kenya, Tanzania, Zanzibar, Mozambique, and Madagascar**, is closing one of the **region's biggest data gaps**. For the first time, countries will have a field-verified baseline map of seagrass extent and carbon stocks, covering over 9,500 km of coastline. By 2026, LaSMMI will deliver a standardized regional map and national capacity for monitoring, enabling seagrass to be integrated into climate strategies and Nationally Determined Contributions. Through training, the project is equipping a new generation of seagrass scientists, ensuring the knowledge and skills remain in the region.

At the regional level, the Nairobi Convention's Science to Policy Platform (WIO-SPP) ensures that findings such as these directly inform ministerial decisions, linking evidence to protocols on marine litter, spatial planning, and ecosystem restoration. Together, these interventions illustrate how science in the WIO is not confined to reports – it is actively shaping management and governance with measurable impact.

POLICY CATALYSING COLLABORATION

Science provides the evidence; policy turns it into shared commitments and coordinated action. Through the **Nairobi Convention**, ministers have adopted a **Regional Ocean Governance Strategy** and advanced protocols on Integrated Coastal Zone Management, marine litter, and pollution control – agreements that enable countries to act together on transboundary challenges.

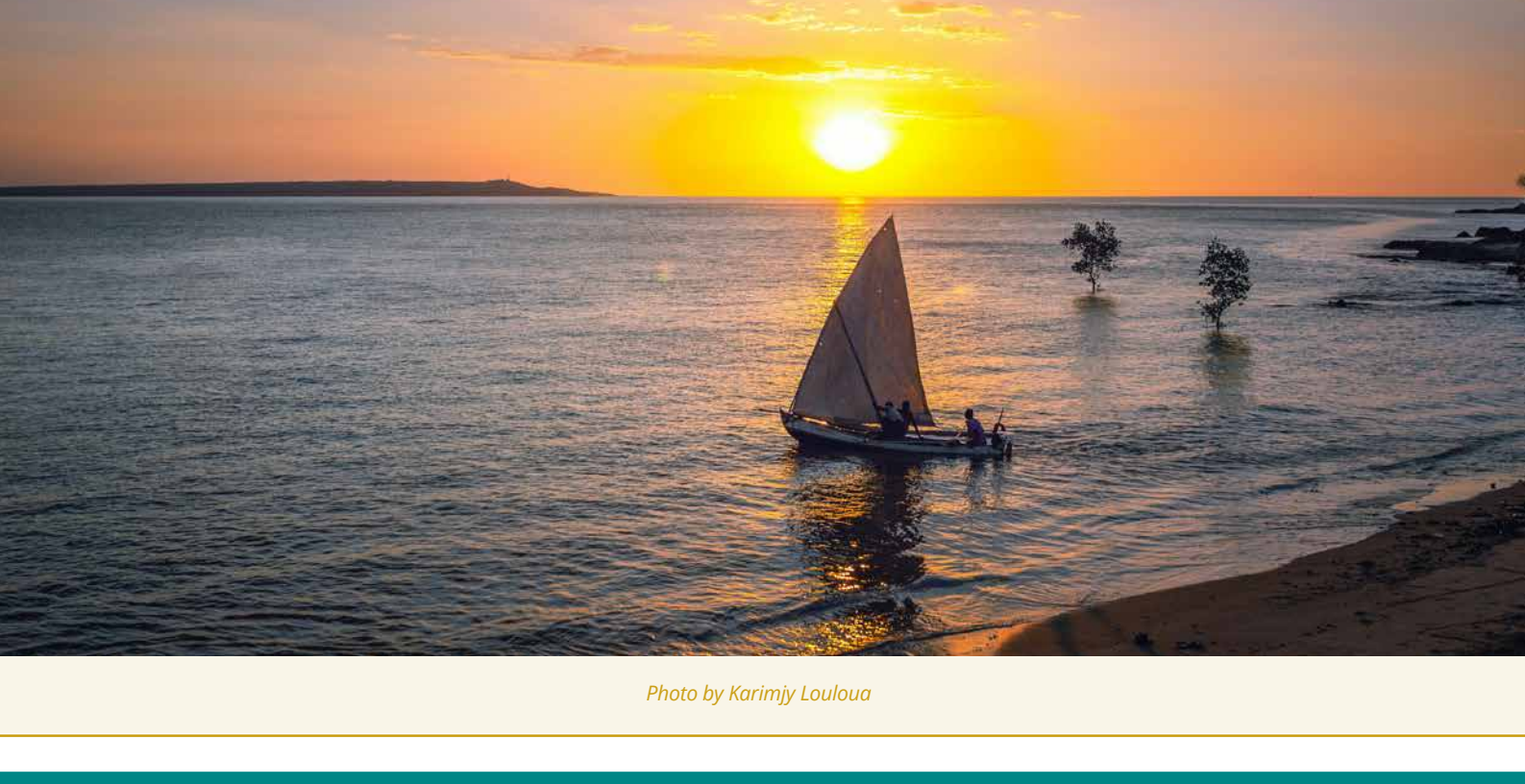


Mangrove restoration in Mozambique- Photo by UNEP

Demonstration projects under the **Western Indian Ocean Strategic Action Programme (WIOSAP)** have already reduced land-based pollution and restored mangroves, wetlands, and seagrasses across nine member states. In Mauritius, WIOSAP supported the Mauritius Oceanography Institute to rehabilitate coral reefs in Poudre D'Or, Le Morne, and Bambous Vireux, restoring over 1,000 m² and training 61 eco-guides. These pilots informed the 2025 climate-action budget, which now targets 250 coral gardens. Seagrass mapping by the Ministry of Blue Economy laid the foundation for a national management plan, new protection measures in the 2023 Fisheries Act, and a Blue Carbon Task Force. In South Africa, WIOSAP supported estuarine restoration in the Buffalo and Swartkops systems through the Department of Forestry, Fisheries and the Environment (DFFE). Collaboration with NGOs, municipalities, and national departments culminated in a Common Water Quality Monitoring Plan, now guiding estuarine management.

The Western Indian Ocean Large Marine Ecosystems **Strategic Action Programme Policy Harmonisation and Institutional Reforms (SAPPHIRE)** project has likewise advanced governance reforms. In Mauritius, it strengthened preparedness by updating the National Oil Spill Contingency Plan and training officers in incident command systems, while in South Africa, it piloted integrated land-sea site plans in four KwaZulu-Natal municipalities. These site plans are demonstration models for MSP, bridging local governance structures with national policy and strengthening institutional coordination.

Together with other regional initiatives – such as the ACP Multilateral Environmental Agreements Programme (ACP MEAs III); the Integrated Management of the Marine and Coastal Resources of the Northern Mozambique Channel (NoCaMo) Project; and the SWIOFC–Nairobi Convention Partnership for Resilient Marine and Coastal Ecosystems and Livelihoods – **countries are now equipped with practical tools ranging from Marine Ecosystem Diagnostic Analyses to contingency plans, action strategies, and site-based governance models.**



Mussel aquaculture in Kanyaka Island, Mozambique - Photo by Melisa Wandia

At the 2025 UN Ocean Conference, **Tanzania announced two new marine protected areas off Pemba Island**: The North-East Pemba Conservation Area (837 km²) and the South-East Pemba Conservation Area (468 km²). Together spanning more than 1,300 km², these sites safeguard coral reefs, seagrass beds, mangroves, and habitats of threatened sharks and rays. The MPAs advance Tanzania's 30x30 commitment and reflect inclusive, science-based planning, supported by the **Wildlife Conservation Society (WCS)** and partners through ecological assessments, stakeholder engagement, and philanthropic funding.

At the same time, new investments are strengthening science-to-policy and **science-to-practice** connections. The **BRIDGES Programme**, a **decade-long initiative** funded at €28 million, is embedding **transdisciplinary research into governance processes across the region**. By testing participatory scenarios and building data observatories, BRIDGES supports decision-makers to weigh trade-offs, co-benefits or synergies between fisheries, climate resilience, and coastal development while ensuring communities have a voice in these choices. As the *Secretariat of the Nairobi Convention observed*, *"Effective Ocean governance relies on integrating scientific knowledge into policies and local community stewardship."*



Photo by Karimiy Louloua

COMMUNITY STEWARDSHIP OF SUSTAINABILITY

Policies and plans gain their strength when rooted in communities that live with the ocean every day. Across the WIO, stewardship by **local people** has proven essential for sustaining ecosystems and livelihoods. In Seychelles, the Wetlands of Hope initiative, led by **Nature Seychelles** and the Ministry of Agriculture, Climate Change and Environment, has mobilised hotels, a bank, and the national airline to invest in wetland restoration. Beyond training staff and conducting biodiversity surveys, the project is introducing a wetland certification label to incentivise businesses and set a national standard for conservation.



The EU-funded Wetlands of Hope initiative" is a government-NGO-private sector partnership for the management and conservation of Seychelles' wetlands - Photo by Marisa Sameidi and Nature Seychelles.

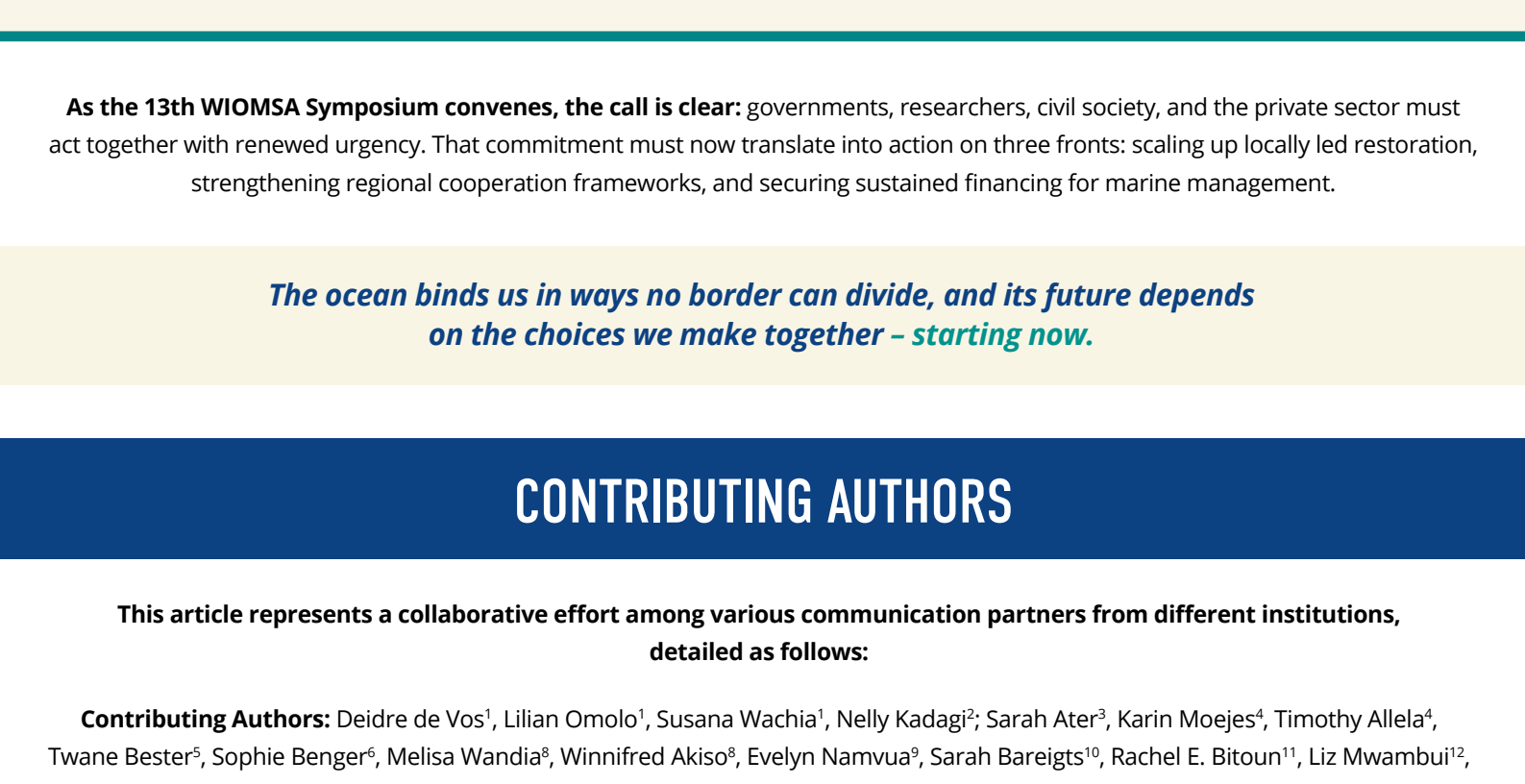
In Mauritius, the Mauritian **Wildlife Foundation** has **restored Ile aux Aigrettes by clearing invasive species, replanting 486 natives, and engaging more than 12,500 visitors in hands-on stewardship**. This work has strengthened seabird habitat, boosted local awareness, and demonstrated how eco-tourism can directly sustain restoration.

In Kenya's coastal village of Shimoni, the Tswaka Three Giant Sister Caves CBO (TTGSC) – a youth- and women-led community-based organisation – with support from the **Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit (GIZ)** GmbH has restored 25 acres of degraded forest around the Three Sister Caves, planting 4,500 trees and creating nurseries that provide seedlings for further expansion



Community members' briefing ahead of the tree planting exercise at Three Giant Sister Caves - Photo by George Mutu

Mozambique's Maputo National Park has taken another approach by creating the **Mungano Friends' Club, a government-recognised platform supported by GIZ where private sector partners contribute funds and in-kind support**. With partners ranging from banks to automotive companies, the Club has already channelled over US\$1 million into habitat restoration, human-wildlife coexistence projects, and community livelihoods, showing how domestic finance can sustain conservation.



Maputo National Park Friends' Club engages on conservation, sustainable tourism and community development - Photo by Armando Uamusse

Communities managing Locally Managed Marine Areas (LMMAs) are also coming together to shape regional priorities. In September 2024, the WIO LMMA Forum in Majunga, Madagascar convened more than 300 LMMA members. Supported by international partners, it enabled active participation of practitioners from across the WIO, ensuring their voices were heard in regional dialogues. Earlier that month, MIHARI hosted Madagascar's National LMMA Forum – the largest in the country's history – with 470 participants from 14 coastal regions. LMMA leaders exchanged practical solutions and raised awareness about climate change under the theme "LMMA leaders resilient in the face of climate change." The Forum culminated in a Regional LMMA Declaration – a unified Call to Action – outlining commitments and priorities of LMMA stakeholders and appealing to governments, NGOs, academia, and the private sector for greater support.

Together, these stories show that community stewardship in the WIO is not symbolic. It delivers measurable restoration, new livelihood pathways, regional solidarity, and financing models that complement national and regional policy – carried forward by the people most invested in the future of their coasts and seas.

CONCLUSION AND CALL TO ACTION

The vision of One Ocean, One Future is already being written across the WIO – in restored wetlands and replanted forests, in data platforms that expose hidden fishing, in regional policies that cross borders, and in new partnerships linking communities, governments, and businesses. These achievements show how the region is advancing the UN Ocean Decade's ambition: producing a predicted ocean through shared monitoring, a resilient and healthy ocean through restoration, a sustainably managed ocean through transparent governance, and an inspiring ocean through community and youth leadership.

Yet the challenges ahead remain immense. Climate change, overexploitation, and inequitable access to resources continue to threaten the resilience of both ecosystems and communities. Meeting these challenges will require:

Scaling the innovations already underway | Securing lasting financing | Ensuring that the next generation is equipped to lead.

As the 13th WIOMSA Symposium convenes, the call is clear: governments, researchers, civil society, and the private sector must act together with renewed urgency. That commitment must now translate into action on three fronts: scaling up locally led restoration, strengthening regional cooperation frameworks, and securing sustained financing for marine management.

The ocean binds us in ways no border can divide, and its future depends on the choices we make together – starting now.

CONTRIBUTING AUTHORS

This article represents a collaborative effort among various communication partners from different institutions, detailed as follows:

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