

OPENING STATEMENT FOR H.E. DR. HILDA C. HEINE
PRESIDENT OF THE REPUBLIC OF THE MARSHALL ISLANDS
Delivered at the Plenary Session of the Third United Nations Ocean
Conference (UNOC3), Nice, France
Monday 9th June 2025

Check Against Delivery

Madame Co-President, Excellencies, Colleagues, Friends of the Ocean,

I bring you warm greetings from the people of the Republic of the Marshall Islands — a proud ocean nation made up of atolls, reef systems, and ancestral knowledge passed down through the stars, the tides, and the winds. Though we are small in landmass, we are vast in ocean — caretakers of over 2,131,000 square kilometres of Pacific Blue.

Our people's relationship with the ocean is intimate. It is not a boundary, but a lifeline. It sustains our food security, underpins our economy, connects our islands, and holds our cultural identity in its embrace. As a frontline atoll nation, our call today is not born of privilege or abundance, but of moral urgency and generational responsibility.

We speak not from the comfort of distance, but from the immediacy of experience.

The legacy of the ocean is etched into the very soul of our nation — but so too is the burden of its degradation. The Republic of the Marshall Islands bears the lasting scars of nuclear testing — a history we carry with quiet resilience, yet it compels us to act boldly in defence of global ocean health. For us, the loss of ecosystems is not an abstraction; it is a slow violence against our way of life.

We have not waited to act.

In January of this year, we declared the Bikar and Bokak Atolls as national marine sanctuaries — the first of their kind in our country — preserving pristine ocean spaces led by traditional leaders under our *Reimaanlok* framework, which means “looking to the future”. This is not just environmental stewardship. It is the fusion of traditional wisdom and modern science, where conservation is driven by community, not just compliance.

We are championing a moratorium on Deep Sea Mining within our waters, underscoring our belief that the ocean’s depths are not commodities to be exploited before we even understand them.

We are taking a leadership role in the negotiation and implementation of the BBNJ Agreement, ensuring that Small Island Developing States like ours have a meaningful voice in the conservation and sustainable use of marine biodiversity beyond national jurisdiction.

Through the East New Britain Initiative and the Pacific Island Tuna Partnership, we are redefining what economic justice in ocean industries looks like: not as distant profits for faraway markets, but as local benefits, local jobs, and regional empowerment. Our Walmart partnership, for instance, has already resulted in over 70 million cans of MSC-certified tuna on global shelves — a concrete demonstration of how Pacific-led sustainability is not only possible but profitable.

We are leading the way in addressing the climate crisis, bringing together ambitious voices through the High Ambition Coalition and championing bold action internationally, and at home. This year we submitted a 1.5-aligned NDC; the major emitters must do the same. We have said how we will transition from fossil fuels; the major emitters must do the same. We have fought for climate finance, especially for adaptation and to respond to loss and damage; those with far more resources must show solidarity with us.

We speak as a custodian of 10% of the world's ocean and as a founding voice of the Blue Pacific Continent — and we say this:

We do not have the luxury of delay. The ocean is warming. The fish are moving. Coral reefs are bleaching. Tides are swallowing our shores, and with them, the memories of our people. In parts of the Pacific, sea levels are rising up to four times faster than the global average.

This is not just an environmental crisis. It is a fundamental threat to our security..

And yet, despite our vulnerabilities, we continue to lead.

Madame Co-President, we are encouraged by the Conference theme — “Accelerating action and mobilizing all actors.” We call for precisely that:

- Integrated responses to the ocean-climate-biodiversity nexus, rooted in science, equity, and indigenous knowledge;
- Robust investment in ocean monitoring, nature-based solutions, and decarbonising marine transport;
- A strong and fully financed SDG 14, which remains one of the most underfunded of the Sustainable Development Goals;
- A clear mandate to operationalise commitments from BBNJ, the Global Biodiversity Framework, and the Paris Agreement — not in parallel, but in synergy;
- Climate action to keep 1.5 in reach, adapt and build resilience, and respond to the impacts of this crisis.

Let us not forget: for us in the Pacific, these are not “sectors” or “themes”. They are our everyday lives. The turtle is not just endangered; it is ancestral. The mangrove is not just a carbon sink; it is a seawall, a nursery, and a sacred place. The whale is not just marine fauna; it is memory, myth, and kin.

We believe the Pacific can be a global laboratory for ocean innovation, where low-emission fisheries, community-led marine protected areas, and sustainable tuna supply chains offer blueprints for the world.

Our Ocean is our Life. This is our truth. We are a small nation with a big ocean and an even bigger commitment to the future.

The Republic of the Marshall Islands is ready. Let us rise together — with courage, with science, with solidarity — to protect the ocean that sustains us all.

Kommol tata. Thank you.