

# United we stand, divided we fall

## The case for a Pacific Seabed Stewardship Statement

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## About the author



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Philippa Louey is a political scientist with an interest in ocean sustainability and governance in the Pacific region. She holds a PhD from the Australian National University where her doctorate explored evolving dynamics in the seabed minerals, community-based marine resource management and marine conservation sectors.

Philippa joined the Pacific Security College as Research Fellow in 2025 where she convenes the Pacific Visitorship Program and supports the College's work around environmental and climate security. Her policy-engaged research has contributed to the work of the Pacific Islands Forum and regional civil society.

## About the Pacific Security College

The Pacific Security College serves members of the Pacific Islands Forum through learning and training, policy engagement and regional collaboration.

We have a holistic approach to Pacific security, encompassing traditional and non-traditional security issues, taking our lead from the Forum's *Boe Declaration on Regional Security*, the *2050 Strategy for the Blue Pacific Continent* and the *Blue Pacific Ocean of Peace Declaration*.

We work in a spirit of service and collaboration with our Pacific stakeholders in national governments, universities, civil society organisations and regional institutions.

### Disclaimer

The Pacific Security College Policy Papers reflect the views of the author alone, and aren't official statements on behalf of the College, its funders, or the Australian National University. The papers aim to contribute a diversity of views and ideas to the regional conversation about the journey to 2050.

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- A rush is underway for the Pacific seabed - characterised by increased complexity and congestion.
- For the Pacific to assert its sovereignty, a collective approach to Pacific seabed governance is critical and pressing.
- The negotiation of a non-binding *Pacific Seabed Stewardship Statement* would be a valuable next step – and there are already shared Pacific seabed stewardship principles from which to draw for the statement.









# Executive summary

## The rush for the Pacific seabed

A rush is underway for access to the Pacific seabed.

Deep-sea ecosystems have attracted interest for their genetic resources, which science and industry are exploring for potential application in areas including pharmaceuticals, biotechnology, agriculture, and cosmetics.

The installation of submarine cables has grown steadily since 2010, experiencing a rapid increase since 2020.

Most contentiously, pursuits of deep-sea mining have been reinvigorated by critical minerals competition and continuing global metals demand.

Clearly, we've entered a new era of seabed activity in the Pacific – and one characterised by increased complexity and congestion.

## United we stand, divided we fall

To effectively manage these accelerating deep-sea activities, the Pacific must draw together in a collective approach to deep-sea governance. There are three key reasons for this.

First, the interconnected and dynamic nature of the Pacific Ocean means seabed activities and their impacts may extend beyond national borders. Cooperation will be required across multiple agencies and nations to ensure the protection of Pacific ecosystems, communities and sovereignty.



Second, the region's leadership in sustainable ocean governance risks being eroded if division on seabed issues continues to fester. A cooperative approach emphasises dialogue, inclusive negotiation and careful decision-making built on a foundation of mutual understanding and respect.

Third, there is real and concerning danger that Pacific communities will be 'played' in the jostle of seabed actors seeking to maximise deep-sea access and profits.

The Pacific stands stronger when it stands together – based on past ocean governance experiences.

A collective approach to Pacific seabed governance is both critical and pressing. The region's policy challenge now is to build seabed cooperation in a manner that keeps all stakeholders at the table while cultivating robust, constructive dialogue.

This task is undoubtedly challenging; however, it is not impossible.

If there is a region skilled in navigating diversity to find areas of solidarity, it is the Pacific.

## Next steps towards a regional seabed approach

The endorsement by Pacific leaders of a "member-led regional seabed approach" in September 2025 marked a key step towards cooperation on seabed governance.

The negotiation of a ***Pacific Seabed Stewardship Statement*** would be a strong move towards a regional approach that can cultivate mutual understanding through shared commitments on seabed stewardship and care.

Such a Statement could provide a principled foundation for collective seabed discussions and guide future regional initiatives and policy.

The Statement could be advanced alongside existing commitments to develop a regional knowledge hub for Pacific seabed information.

This is how it could work:

- Include negotiation of a *Pacific Seabed Stewardship Statement* as a priority action on the agenda of the Forum Officials Committee (FOC) and Deep-Sea Minerals Talanoa. These negotiations could be led by the Office of the Pacific Ocean Commissioner, with support from the Pacific Islands Forum and relevant CROP agencies.
- The Statement should articulate shared and mutually agreed principles of Pacific seabed stewardship as they relate to all established and emerging seabed sectors active in the region.
  - These principles could be shaped by eight key themes:
    - Heritage and Connection
    - Justice
    - Ecosystem Health
    - Development
    - Geopolitical Management
    - Knowledge
    - Coordination and Cooperation
    - Governance
  - As this paper shows, there already exists a robust set of shared seabed stewardship principles that have been expressed by Pacific stakeholders. These provide a useful starting point for the Statement's negotiation.



- In the short term, the Statement should be non-binding to encourage the participation of all Forum members, acknowledging the diversity of perspectives on some seabed activities.
- Transparency, accountability and inclusion are critical. The development of this Statement should be informed by and consulted on with a broad range of regional stakeholders including customary leaders, faith groups, civil society and youth representatives.

## The time for cooperation is now

Increasing interest in the Pacific seabed is introducing new and complex governance challenges that few, if any, nations can effectively manage on their own.

Regional seabed cooperation may be a daunting task, but without it, the Pacific and its ecosystems risk being played in a global race to the bottom.

Shared principles offer a decisive starting point in the journey to a regional seabed approach – one that will enable the Pacific to determine a path of its own choosing.







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## Director's introduction

I am delighted to launch the first of the Pacific Security College's policy papers. We hope these papers will contribute to regional discussions about how we can best realise the *2050 Strategy for the Blue Pacific Continent*, the long-term vision that leaders of the Pacific Islands Forum have set out for us all.

When asked to look ahead to the Pacific of 2050, a recent gathering of Pacific parliamentarians suggested the Pacific should be the superpower of ocean resources and stewardship.

The story of how the Pacific has managed its tuna resources, to both maximise returns and promote sustainability, already shows the power of Pacific collaboration.

Now, new opportunities and challenges loom.

There is a race for the Pacific seabed's many resources.

This paper doesn't shy away from the different views among members of the Pacific Islands Forum about how that race should be managed.

But it does suggest there are key shared principles which provide a foundation for cooperation.

The paper advances a vital hypothesis: that a *Pacific Seabed Stewardship Statement*, drawing on these areas of commonality, will help the Pacific to manage its seabed in ways which will benefit all Pacific governments and peoples.

Such a non-binding statement wouldn't be the last word in Pacific seabed cooperation. The ongoing efforts of the Pacific Islands Forum Secretariat and the Office of the Pacific Ocean Commissioner will be critical. But a statement would be an important step on the journey to being a powerful and united strategic bloc in 2050, protecting and profiting from the Blue Pacific's resources.





My thanks to the author, Dr Philippa Louey, for her outstanding work. Our policy papers are intended to be conversations, and I'm deeply grateful for the contributions of Professor Transform Aqorau, Vice-Chancellor of the Solomon Islands National University; Ms Rhea Moss-Christian, Executive Director of the Western and Central Pacific Fisheries Commission; and Dr Manumatavai Tupou-Roosen, Deputy Vice-Chancellor and Vice-President (Regional Campuses and Global Engagement), the University of the South Pacific.

Finally, I note our papers represent the views of the author alone. They aren't an official statement from the College, our university, or our funders. They do reflect our deep conviction that we get to good policy, and good academic discussion, from listening to a diversity of views, from asking questions about where we are and where we might go, and from looking ahead to 2050 with optimism and confidence.

**Dave Peebles**  
Director, Pacific Security College



# The Pacific's seabed policy challenge

## The deep-sea acceleration

Deep-sea activities in the Pacific have accelerated to the point that explicit seabed governance frameworks are critically needed.

With a combined jurisdiction spanning 20 per cent of the world's oceans, Pacific countries and territories have long been stewards of a vast and richly biodiverse seabed. Yet in recent years, this ecosystem has attracted increasing global attention for commercial and strategic reasons. This raises new and complex policy challenges for Pacific stakeholders.

The number of submarine cables across the region has grown substantially over the past decade, particularly since 2020. Pacific deep-sea organisms have captured scientific and commercial interest for their value to areas such as pharmaceuticals and biotechnology. And perhaps most contentiously, deep-sea mining proponents have sharpened their focus on the considerable amount of minerals found in the Pacific seabed. Increasing competition for critical minerals and demand for metals have further fuelled deep-sea mining ambitions.

These emerging sectors are attracting new and re-energised stakeholders to the region, seeking access to the Pacific seabed and its resources. This brings both opportunities and challenges for Pacific communities.

Above all, it calls for responsible seabed stewardship. It is essential Pacific nations adopt explicit seabed governance frameworks to assert their authority over the Pacific seabed and ensure its effective management. This will help protect against irresponsible seabed activity and harmful agreements.

The development of national seabed governance frameworks is an important starting point, but nations need to look beyond state boundaries to a regional seabed approach.





## Momentum is growing

Conversations around what regional collaboration for Pacific seabed governance could look like have been slowly but steadily growing over the past two decades. This has largely been driven by developments in the deep-sea minerals sector. Proposals have been raised for:

- A regional deep-sea minerals treaty or agreement.<sup>1</sup>
- Developing harmonised minimum terms and conditions for seabed activities across Pacific jurisdictions.<sup>2</sup>
- Instituting an independent, self-funding seabed secretariat or agency to support nations in managing seabed activities modelled on the Parties to the Nauru Agreement.<sup>3</sup>
- Adopting a regional 10-year deep-sea mining moratorium to provide time for regional discussions and further research.<sup>4</sup>

Despite longstanding efforts none of these proposals have materialised.

The Deep-Sea Minerals Talanoa hosted by the Pacific Islands Forum (PIF) Secretariat in February 2025 elevated the idea of regional seabed cooperation among political and policy stakeholders. The idea was first endorsed by Pacific leaders at the 52nd PIF Leaders' Meeting (2023) in response to growing deep-sea mining and deepening regional division over this sector. The Talanoa convened in Suva from 18 to 21 February 2025, marking a key step in the journey towards regional seabed cooperation.

Perhaps the most important outcome to emerge from the Deep-Sea Minerals Talanoa was support for the idea of a “regional deep-sea minerals approach”. Support was also extended for developing a regional seabed repository to consolidate scientific information and address knowledge gaps.

Building on this Deep-Sea Minerals Talanoa, Pacific leaders “considered and supported the proposed member-led regional approach to deep-sea minerals” at the 54th PIF Leaders' Meeting. Publicly available information on the proposed regional approach remains limited; however, further clarity should emerge as work towards an implementation plan advances through the PIF Forum Officials Committee (FOC).

## Broadening focus to a regional seabed approach

Recent endorsement of a regional deep-sea minerals approach marks a positive step towards greater Pacific cooperation on seabed governance. It also presents an opportunity to expand this vision to address other seabed sectors.

As discussed earlier, the deep-sea minerals sector is not the only rapidly growing industry in the Pacific. Submarine cable deployment, marine genetic resource exploration and seabed mapping are also increasing. Many of these sectors present possible transboundary impacts and would be better managed through a holistic approach to regional seabed governance.



There are several strong political arguments for expanding the current focus to a regional seabed approach.

- By decentring deep-sea mining in discussions, Pacific stakeholders have additional areas around which to negotiate and build cooperation. Deep-sea mining therefore remains a key part of discussions, but is not the sole focus.
- The topic of deep-sea mining is subject to political sensitivity and tension. Moving towards a regional seabed approach could promote agreement on other areas, while allowing deep-sea mining issues to receive due time and care for negotiation.
- Trust built around other areas of seabed cooperation could cultivate greater regional willingness to work together on deep-sea mining.

A holistic seabed approach would ultimately support better outcomes across all deep-sea sectors. Critically, it would also encourage a diverse range of Pacific stakeholders to stay at the table to participate in other areas of regional seabed decision-making.

As the Pacific looks to a regional approach to deep-sea minerals, there is an opportunity to broaden this ambition to seabed sectors in general. The key question now is where to start: establishing a set of shared principles for Pacific seabed stewardship may be the place to begin.

## The case for regional seabed cooperation

Regional cooperation on seabed governance is essential for three key reasons.

### **1. The deep-sea is connected to broader ocean ecosystems, which means activity in one nation's waters may have impacts on the maritime areas of their neighbours.**

There is a clear transboundary dimension to seabed governance.

The movement of waste, sediment and nutrients around the sea floor means that deep-sea activities in one area of the Pacific seabed are likely to impact other marine areas. Particularly if these activities involve deep-sea interventions.

In some cases, seabed activities may impact areas across territorial boundaries.

A regional seabed approach can strengthen the collective and individual ability of Pacific nations to manage these transboundary impacts by enabling and encouraging cooperation among neighbouring states. Recognising that deep-sea activities conducted in one jurisdiction may affect others could provide a platform to negotiate and agree on cross-border measures. A regional approach could also guide state cooperation and responses if deep-sea activities or impacts stretch across multiple jurisdictions. This will only become more important as seabed activities increase across the region.





## **2. Cooperation on seabed governance would strengthen the Pacific's negotiating power in the International Seabed Authority and with commercial stakeholders.**

Working as a regional strategic bloc can strengthen Pacific sovereignty over seabeds and marine resources.

The Pacific has a long and proud history of collective solidarity to advance shared interests, including the *Treaty of Rarotonga* (1985), the Parties to the Nauru Agreement, advocacy around climate action, and negotiation of the *High Seas Treaty* (2023). In all these cases, regional action helped to level the playing field between large, well-resourced global powers and Pacific nations.

The enormous economic and political power of state and commercial stakeholders interested in Pacific seabed resources poses a challenge for the region. If Pacific nations commit to a shared approach that pools the region's sovereignty, the Pacific can operate as a coalition that asserts power far beyond individual state capacities.

As history remind us, the region stands stronger when it stands together.

## **3. A regional approach to seabed governance will protect Pacific communities from being played against one another by competitive deep-sea interests.**

In the past, those interested in Pacific resources have used 'divide and conquer' tactics to exploit economic and political competition within the region. This has driven a race to the bottom for natural resource profit and access (e.g. offshore fisheries, mining, logging and large-scale tourism). These tactics cut revenue for Pacific economies and landholders, weaken environmental regulations and unsettle social relations.

Experts warn that similar dynamics are emerging in seabed sectors, with some contractors seeking to exploit Pacific development needs and commercial-in-confidence provisions for their own profit. This can produce one-sided agreements that favour the contractors – not Pacific economies – and also undermine Pacific sovereignty.

A regional approach to seabed governance would foster a spirit of cooperation consistent with the Blue Pacific vision. It would resist attempts to divide the Pacific as part of a global 'rush' for seabed resources, territories and access. It would strengthen enforcement mechanisms by holding seabed actors responsible for their behaviours across the region.

### **A diversity of Pacific views**

A collective approach need not ignore diverse positions on seabed activities across the region (particularly regarding deep-sea minerals). All states would retain their sovereign right to make their own decisions about seabed use.

What a regional approach provides is an opportunity for Pacific communities to dialogue, learn and strategise for the benefit of individual and collective interest. It won't be easy – but it is critically important as seabed interest accelerates.

The next question is 'how'?







## A foundation for regional seabed cooperation

A set of **shared principles on seabed stewardship** could provide a foundation that nurtures cooperation and guides collective action on seabed governance across the region. Their negotiation also opens space for Pacific leaders and communities to gather and discuss seabed management from a foundation of national priorities and mutual understanding.

Identifying seabed stewardship principles in a regionally negotiated Statement would enable the Pacific to define shared commitments that guide their approach to deep-sea governance. Like other regional statements, including the *Boe Declaration* (2018) and *PIF Leaders Ocean Statement* (2021), this Statement of Pacific Seabed Stewardship would not be legally binding. Rather, it would offer a statement of normative commitments and a point of accountability for the region.

Over the longer term, parties may look to incorporate these principles into a binding regional treaty – in the style of the *Treaty of Rarotonga* (1985). However, in the interests of initiating regional discussion and ensuring all stakeholders remain at the table, it would be beneficial for this Statement to be non-binding at first.



## An existing basis for mutual understanding

Pacific stakeholders have been articulating clear principles around seabed stewardship over the past 20 years (in many cases, longer). While statements on seabed management and use have come from diverse stakeholders with similarly varied interests, there has been remarkable commonality between key principles across these actors.

Commitment to the precautionary principle, for example, is regularly seen in statements on seabed governance among Pacific actors, be they civil society, government, deep-sea mining proponents or critics. Respect for the rules-based global order (or multilateralism) is similarly evident across a broad range of Pacific statements. This suggests an existing foundation of mutual understanding among the region on key seabed governance norms.

Analysis undertaken for this paper of 85 publicly available statements from Pacific stakeholders between 2005 to 2025 (media releases, speeches, position statements, etc.) revealed **eight themes common across Pacific understandings of seabed stewardship**.

### Shared Principles of Pacific Seabed Stewardship: Eight key themes



These themes offer a firm basis upon which to negotiate a *Statement of Pacific Seabed Stewardship*. They affirm that while there are differences among the region regarding seabed management and use, there are also areas of convergence. This offers a springboard for negotiation of a *Statement of Pacific Seabed Stewardship*, building on decades of thinking and discussion from around the region.



# Unpacking the eight key themes

## 1. Heritage and Connection

Stakeholders across the region have frequently and powerfully described their longstanding connection to the ocean, including the deep seabed. These connections provide the foundation for seabed stewardship, which many interpret as an obligation to care for and responsibly manage the Pacific deep-sea.

Connections to the Pacific seabed were recognised across multiple dimensions, including cultural, spiritual, historical and ecological. This is reflected in maritime heritage mapping across the region.

## 2. Justice

Justice has long been a central demand and objective of Pacific approaches to seabed management and use.

Stakeholders emphasised the need for justice across both seabed *outcomes and processes*, and were attentive to multiple layers of justice that weave between Pacific communities, state governments and the international system.

Civil society has been particularly strong in championing human rights and customary rights with regards to seabed governance. This includes advocacy for free, prior and informed consent and youth inclusion in seabed governance processes.

Self-determination featured as a key concern, particularly among Pacific territories. Representatives from these nations argued for the authority to decide on seabed activities and management, independent of colonial powers.





Small Island Developing States (SIDS) special case recognition was regularly advocated for by national and regional stakeholders in international forums, with calls for greater consideration of the unique circumstances of SIDS, and targeted and tailored measures that reflect these distinct needs. In the seabed context, the *United Nations Law of the Sea* (UNCLOS) Article 82(4) presents a powerful lever for Pacific stakeholders to elevate the region's interests and influence in international seabed negotiations.

### 3. Ecosystem Health

The protection of ecosystem health was a clear priority for all stakeholders in their statements on seabed management and use. Commitments to ecological integrity were often associated with the idea of stewardship. This saw multiple stakeholders frame ecosystem care as part of their cultural responsibilities.

The precautionary principle was commonly cited by stakeholders, regardless of their positions on deep-sea mining. This principle encourages a cautious approach to seabed use in the interest of preventing potential environmental harm, particularly when there are gaps in scientific understanding. The Pacific's broad support for the precautionary principle aligns with international norms on natural resources (e.g. the *Rio Declaration* and the *UN Fish Stocks Agreement*) and the 2011 *Advisory Opinion* issued by the International Tribunal for the Law of the Sea.

Stakeholders also prioritised integrated ecosystem management, encouraging a collaborative seabed governance approach. Integrated ecosystem management has long been a key priority of Pacific ocean policies, including in the *Framework for a Pacific Oceanscape* (2010), the *Palau Declaration* (2014) and the *Pacific Islands Forum Leaders Ocean Statement* (2021).

### 4. Development

Multiple Pacific stakeholders recognised the potential for seabed activities to contribute to the economic development of Pacific nations.

Key commitments considered necessary for facilitating seabed development included:

- Equitable and sustainable access to finance to support Pacific investment and activities in seabed sectors.
- Technology transfer to equip Pacific nations to conduct their own seabed research, activities and data management.
- Capacity building to support the region's leadership and participation in seabed policies, regulation, research and activities.

The principle of sustainable development featured heavily. Representatives broadly acknowledged the need for consideration of social and environmental impacts alongside economic revenue when weighing up seabed engagements. Some questioned the effects deep-sea mining may have on other sectors critical for the sustainable development of Pacific communities, including fisheries and tourism. In these cases, certain seabed activities were considered inconsistent with principles of sustainable development and discouraged.



## 5. Geopolitical Management

Pacific stakeholders have become increasingly vocal about the geopolitical factors influencing seabed governance and use.

Commitment to the global rules-based order has been particularly emphasised by stakeholders of the region over the past five years. This has been spurred by negotiations of a *Mining Code* at the International Seabed Authority and more recently, Washington's interest in permitting deep-sea mining in the international seabed through domestic regulation. Regional stakeholders broadly recognise that a strong multilateral system governed by international law is in the best interest of Pacific states and communities.

The protection of the seabed exclusively for peaceful purposes is another principle that has received reinvigorated attention from Pacific stakeholders in recent years. Peaceful use of the international seabed is an idea enshrined in UNCLOS Article 141 that also holds deep resonance with key Pacific frameworks including the *Treaty of Rarotonga* (1985) and the *Ocean of Peace Declaration* (2025).

## 6. Knowledge

Elevating and strengthening Pacific deep-sea knowledge is a clear priority among stakeholders.

Support for rigorous science was broadly shared among stakeholder groups. This was often seen as critical for evidence-based decision-making and effective monitoring. Civil society and some state representatives encouraged greater support for independent science. These stakeholders expressed caution over the significant role commercial actors currently play in seabed science, querying how this may influence deep-sea science, information sharing and data sovereignty.

Effective monitoring and information sharing was raised by all stakeholder groups, including recommendations for periodic assessment and review, inspection mechanisms, collective monitoring efforts, and a regional data repository.

Many stakeholders called for greater recognition of indigenous knowledge systems in seabed science and decision-making. Indigenous knowledge systems were often recognised as complementary to western science, while importantly grounded in and responsive to distinct cultural and ecological contexts.

Stakeholders also emphasised the importance of transparent seabed information to ensure public accountability of deep-sea research, licensing and decision-making. Transparency was central to the 2022 Papua New Guinea Supreme Court ruling on *Mesulam v Joku*, which reaffirmed the constitutional right of freedom of information in a case centred on deep-sea mining.



## 7. Coordination and Cooperation

Stakeholders emphasised the need for improved seabed coordination and cooperation in both regional and international contexts, including:

- Improved compatibility and harmonisation of seabed governing frameworks to support regulatory compatibility at both regional and international scales. This included region-wide minimum terms and conditions across the Pacific, and ensuring national seabed regulations were consistent and compliant with international legal frameworks.
- Strengthened efforts towards regional seabed cooperation. Calls for regional seabed cooperation were observed as early as 2013 with the *Pacific Plan Review*. The Pacific leaders' endorsement of the Deep-Sea Minerals Talanoa at the 52nd PIF Leaders' Meeting (2023) pushed these efforts forward, spurring cooperation at a political level.

## 8. Governance

Strong governance across both state and international contexts was a common theme.

All stakeholder groups emphasised the need for inclusive and participatory decision-making, including calls to strengthen the inclusion of women, youth, indigenous peoples and non-government actors in seabed discussions.

Stakeholders were acutely aware of the transboundary nature of ocean ecosystems, with cooperative governance approaches regarded as critical for effective management of the interconnected nature of seabed activities. They recognised that deep-sea impacts are rarely isolated but shared among many.

A growing body of Pacific stakeholders also highlighted how 'responsible' seabed use and development entailed issues of compliance and liability. This relationship was made explicit in a 2011 *Advisory Opinion* issued by the International Tribunal on the Law of the Sea (ITLOS), which reaffirmed the obligations of sponsoring states to ensure contractor compliance with international frameworks. The idea of 'polluter pays' was also identified by some regional and national stakeholders as a necessary component of responsible seabed governance. This concept proposes to hold contractors and sponsoring states responsible for the impacts of their seabed activities, building on norms advocated through global climate change and plastics negotiations.





## Final observations

The Pacific needs a decisive and collaborative approach to seabed governance given the current intensification of deep-sea activities.

The development of a ***Statement of Pacific Seabed Stewardship*** as proposed here – one that identifies shared values of deep-sea engagement and recognises sovereignty and diverging priorities – provides a way for Pacific nations to stand together in recognition of their shared interest in protecting seabed resources and territory.

A collectively agreed, non-binding Statement provides a way to keep all actors at the table, regardless of diverse positions.

The Statement could be developed through the Pacific Islands Forum regional architecture over 2026 – led by the Office of the Pacific Ocean Commissioner, with support from relevant agencies. Draft text could be presented for leaders' consideration at the 55th PIF Leaders' Meeting in 2026. This would progress work towards a regional seabed approach and provide a foundation for its implementation.

Robust seabed stewardship principles can be articulated through consideration of eight common themes that capture the already articulated concerns and priorities of Pacific stakeholders:

- Heritage and Connection
- Justice
- Ecosystem Health
- Development
- Geopolitical Management
- Knowledge
- Coordination and Cooperation
- Governance



Collective solidarity may be the Pacific's greatest strength in securing positive outcomes for communities, ecosystems and economies of the region. This is where shared principles of seabed stewardship offer a foundation for a Pacific-led pathway forward.

Guided by the adage, 'united we stand, divided we fall', progress towards a regional seabed approach is critical for all stakeholders of the Pacific.

It is an important part of the Blue Pacific's journey as a superpower for ocean resources and sustainability into 2050.





**In conversation with...**





## Professor Transform Aqorau Vice-Chancellor, Solomon Islands National University

The paper offers an important and constructive contribution to current regional conversations on Pacific seabed governance. The recognition that the Pacific is entering a period of intensified seabed interest – spanning cables, marine genetic resources, mapping, and deep-sea minerals – is consistent with longstanding concerns raised by Pacific governments, civil society, and technical agencies. What is most valuable in this work is the emphasis on shared principles rather than positions. At a time when perspectives on deep-sea mining remain diverse, a principled foundation provides a pragmatic and politically workable path forward.

Across Pacific statements over nearly two decades – whether from governments, communities, regional institutions or civil society – certain themes consistently reappear: precaution, justice, transparency, environmental stewardship, and the importance of informed, inclusive decision-making. These findings mirror the insights from the Comprehensive Framework for MIMRA, the Marshall Islands proposal for a Pacific Islands Deep Seabed Mining Regulatory Authority (PIDSRA), and the High-Level Talanoa CSO Briefing. Together, they reflect a broad regional appetite for stronger governance, better knowledge, fairer distribution of benefits, and safeguards that recognise both cultural connection and ecological vulnerability. The Louey paper rightly anchors these in heritage, justice, knowledge, development, and cooperation – an architecture already familiar to Pacific audiences.

The idea of a **Pacific Seabed Stewardship Statement** is particularly compelling. It provides a non-binding, inclusive mechanism capable of holding all stakeholders at the table while avoiding premature decisions on divisive issues. This aligns closely with recent Forum discussions, including the Deep-Sea Minerals Talanoa, and offers an adaptable platform into which more formal regulatory or institutional arrangements – such as PIDSRA – could later nest. As the analysis in the Marshall Islands proposal demonstrates, regulatory fragmentation poses risks not just to environmental integrity but to sovereignty, coherence, and negotiating strength. A stewardship statement can help consolidate principles and values before institutional choices are made.

Importantly, the paper also recognises the Pacific's long experience with 'divide and conquer' dynamics. Whether in fisheries, logging, or extractives more generally, the region has repeatedly seen how uncoordinated national pathways can be manipulated by external actors. Civil society, as highlighted in the CSO Briefing Paper for the Talanoa, continues to raise concerns about irreversible environmental impacts, knowledge gaps, and the risk that mining proceeds in the absence of enforceable safeguards. A stewardship statement can act as an early guardrail, signalling to all actors – contractors, states, and multilateral bodies – that Pacific agency and Pacific values remain at the centre of decision-making.

Ultimately, the value of this paper lies in its ability to widen the frame beyond deep-sea minerals. A holistic seabed approach recognises that governance, stewardship and Pacific sovereignty extend across all depths and all uses of the seabed. As the region moves toward a member-led approach endorsed by leaders, this proposal offers one of the few constructive, unifying pathways capable of bridging political diversity while protecting long-term Pacific interests. It deserves serious consideration as part of the emerging regional agenda on seabed governance.



**Ms Rhea Moss-Christian**  
Executive Director, Western  
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Commission

Evidence of effective Pacific stewardship of valuable natural resources can be seen in Pacific regional cooperation to manage the world's largest tuna fishery. The paper references the success of the Parties to the Nauru Agreement (PNA) model, and I would include the Pacific Islands Forum Fisheries Agency (FFA) as another successful regional approach to sustainable management of economically vital tuna resources. Since its establishment in 1979, the FFA has been a solid platform from which Pacific Island tuna fisheries interests are coordinated and strengthened for the broader interests of the region. Recognising the diversity of interests and development goals and starting points, the FFA model seeks to provide opportunity for each distinct island member voice to contribute to a common outcome that reflects the interests of each individual member.

The author rightfully acknowledges the value in focusing (at least initially) on common values rather than on a single position 'for' or 'against' seabed mining. The Pacific region's success in focusing on cooperation and constructive dialogue can be seen in its initiative in the mid-1990s that led to the adoption of the Western and Central Pacific Fisheries Convention (WCPFC) in 2000. In that multilateral effort, FFA members set the scene and led the way for a spectrum of interests to culminate in a single objective: to conserve and sustainably manage highly migratory fish stocks in the Western and Central Pacific Ocean (WCPO). Regional solidarity through the WCPFC framework has not been without its challenges, and the stakes grow ever higher each year as development needs grow and evolve within each FFA member. But the effectiveness of the decision-making model of regional consensus can be seen in the sustainability outcomes of the region's tuna fisheries, where six key tuna stocks are being harvested sustainably.

WCPFC members, which include the 17 members of the FFA, recently recognised the need to stay abreast of deep seabed mining developments and supported the WCPFC seeking observer status to the International Seabed Authority. Now, members will have access to a flow of information on deep-sea mining to consider in the course of managing tuna fisheries in the WCPO. This is a commitment to increasing awareness, which is a necessary prerequisite to the regional approaches advocated in the paper. It is a commitment to continuation of the Pacific stewardship of ocean resources, through awareness and understanding and a recognition of the strength of collaboration.



## Dr Manumatavai Tupou-Roosen Acting Deputy Vice-Chancellor and Vice-President (Regional Campuses and Global Engagement), The University of the South Pacific

Dr Louey presents a compelling and well-substantiated case for the development of a non-legally binding **Pacific Seabed Stewardship Statement** as a fundamental step towards a regional seabed approach.

I fully agree that the collective approach has shown us time and again that when we stand together, we are not just stronger, everyone wins.

A classic example is our **tale of tuna**. Our successful stewardship of these valuable resources above the seabed can help us to navigate our stewardship of resources below the seabed.

It is not by chance that we are the only region in the world where all four major tuna stocks are healthy. These highly migratory stocks could not be managed by one country alone – it requires all of us.

### Visionary and unifying leadership

In the late 1970s, it was the visionary leadership of our Forum Leaders that brought our people together on tuna governance. During a period when Pacific States were newly independent and emerging, ongoing negotiations on the UN Law of the Sea Convention were still underway and the Exclusive Economic Zone was yet to be established, our leaders united to create a regional mechanism – the Forum Fisheries Agency (FFA). Simply put, FFA ensures that our people work together and achieve together. This foresight safeguarded our people from being played off against each other – and it has paid off multiple-fold.

At this pivotal moment, it is this same visionary leadership to bring our people together that is urgently required to guide seabed governance – at a time when tensions mount on possible significant economic gains and potential significant risks of a new industry in deep-sea mining; while the International Seabed Authority continues to finalise extraction regulations; and when the Pacific stands at the forefront as a global champion on environmental stewardship and holds unparalleled moral authority on climate action. The challenges before us demand immediate and coordinated action.

The more spaces that we can usefully create at various levels for relevant stakeholders to *talanoa* about the stewardship of our Pacific seabed, the better. Indeed, I agree with Dr Louey that this will “build seabed cooperation in a manner that keeps all stakeholders at the table while cultivating robust, constructive dialogue”.



## Leading in integrated ocean governance

A unified Pacific approach recognises the interdependence of resources above and below the seabed. A non-legally binding approach is a non-confrontational yet strong statement of principles to steer us. This statement can serve as a strategic platform to guide sustainable practices, strengthen regional solidarity, and safeguard our shared ocean heritage. It can also act as a catalyst for coordinated action, ensuring that the principles we uphold for tuna fisheries above the seabed also inform responsible stewardship of the mineral resources and fragile ecosystems beneath it. By aligning these priorities, we position the Pacific as a leader in integrated ocean governance.

We are strong and resilient large Ocean States that have withstood all manner of challenges for centuries - well before the establishment of the Sustainable Development Goals. As stated by Professor Epeli Hau'ofa, *"no people on earth are more suited to be guardians of the world's largest ocean than those whom it has been home for generations"*. Our responsibility is clear: to steward our Pacific home so that it endures for our children, honouring the sacred trust passed down by those before us.

This serves as a strong reminder - our Cooperation is our Greatest Strength and our People are our Greatest Asset. Placing our people at the centre of every decision is the essence of the Pacific Way. Any statement or initiative on seabed governance must uphold this principle as its foremost priority. As exemplified by our tale of tuna, we always remember why we must work together - Our People, Our Ocean, Our Future.





## Contributor profiles



**Ms Rhea Moss-Christian**  
Executive Director  
Western and Central Pacific Fisheries Commission

Ms Moss-Christian is the first Pacific woman to lead the Western and Central Pacific Fisheries Commission (WCPFC), the international body managing the world's largest tuna fishery. Her appointment in December 2022 reflected nearly three decades of leadership in fisheries management and conservation across the Pacific Islands region.

Her career spans public service, consultancy, and regional leadership, including roles with the Republic of the Marshall Islands Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the United States National Marine Fisheries Service in Honolulu, Hawai'i, and the Federated States of Micronesia's National Oceanic Resource Management Authority (NORMA). As an independent consultant, Ms Moss-Christian worked with organisations such as The Nature Conservancy and the Pacific Islands Forum Fisheries Agency on initiatives to strengthen regional monitoring and compliance.

Ms Moss-Christian served as Chair of the WCPFC's Technical and Compliance Committee (2012-2014) and as the first woman Chair of the Commission (2015-2018).

In 2017, she was appointed as the first Chair of the Marshall Islands National Nuclear Commission, where she played a pivotal role in establishing the commission and developing a national strategy for nuclear justice. Her career in the Marshall Islands Government also included roles as Deputy Secretary of Resources and Development and as an Oceans and Fisheries Adviser to the Minister of Foreign Affairs and Trade.

Ms Moss-Christian is a member of the Pacific Security College's Advisory Board and the Asia-Pacific Leadership Network. She has a Global MBA from the Fletcher School at Tufts University, an MA in International Policy Studies from Stanford University, a Postgraduate Certificate in Diplomatic Studies from Oxford University, and a BA in Politics from the University of California, Santa Cruz.

Born in the Marshall Islands and holding dual nationality with the United States, Ms Moss-Christian resides in Pohnpei, Federated States of Micronesia.



**Professor Transform Aqorau**  
Vice-Chancellor  
Solomon Islands National University

Professor Aqorau is a distinguished international lawyer and academic with extensive experience in regional and international fisheries governance. Prior to his appointment at Solomon Islands National University (SINU), Professor Aqorau served as the founding Chief Executive Officer of the Parties to the Nauru Agreement (PNA) Office in Majuro, Marshall Islands, where he led transformative reforms in tuna fisheries management in the Pacific.

He was formerly the Deputy Director-General and Legal Counsel at the Pacific Islands Forum Fisheries Agency (FFA), and also served as International Legal Adviser at the Pacific Islands Forum Secretariat. Earlier in his career, Professor Aqorau held the position of Legal Adviser at the Solomon Islands Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

Professor Aqorau is widely recognised for his leadership in fisheries law and development, and his contributions to regional policy and governance in the Pacific Islands.



**Dr Manumatavai Tupou-Roosen**  
Acting Deputy Vice-Chancellor and  
Vice-President (Regional Campuses  
and Global Engagement)  
The University of the South Pacific

Dr Tupou-Roosen served as the Director-General of the Pacific Islands Forum Fisheries Agency (FFA) from November 2018 to November 2024. She was unanimously appointed by Fisheries Ministers. Dr Tupou-Roosen was the first woman to serve in this role. Prior to this, she was the head of FFA's legal team for more than a decade.

She is currently the Acting Deputy Vice-Chancellor and Vice-President (Regional Campuses and Global Engagement) at the University of the South Pacific, a fisheries consultant, and is on the Board of Trustees for the newly established Pacific Academy of Sciences.

Dr Tupou-Roosen is a member of the Pacific Security College's Advisory Board. She holds a Master of Laws (First Class Honours) from the University of Canterbury, and a PhD from the University of Nottingham, where she held a Commonwealth scholarship. She is a citizen of Tonga.













## Endnotes

- 1 Hannah Lily (2016) A regional deep-sea minerals treaty for the Pacific Islands? *Marine Policy*, 70; Akuila Tawake (2018) *Overview of Pacific Deep Sea Minerals Development*. The Pacific Community (SPC).
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## Data availability

A spreadsheet with the 85 analysed statements and seabed stewardship themes is available [for download](#). You are also most welcome to contact the Pacific Security College to request the spreadsheet: [psc@anu.edu.au](mailto:psc@anu.edu.au).

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