INTERNATIONAL MARITIME ORGANIZATION

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4 ALBERT EMBANKMENT
LONDON SE1 7SR
Telephone: +44 (0)20 7735 7611 Fax: +44 (0)20 7587 3210

Circular Letter No.4959
10 January 2025

To: IMO Members and other Governments
United Nations and specialized agencies
Intergovernmental organizations
Non-governmental organizations in consultative status

Subject: **World Maritime Day 2025**

1 The Secretary-General has the honour to advise that **World Maritime Day** will be celebrated at IMO Headquarters on 25 September 2025, and that the **World Maritime Day Parallel Event** is expected to be celebrated in the United Arab Emirates. Arrangements will be announced in due course.

2 This year's World Maritime Day theme is:

"Our Ocean
Our Obligation
Our Opportunity"

and a background paper is annexed to this circular letter to assist Member Governments and international organizations in preparing their own activities and communications related to the theme and for use in observing World Maritime Day.

3 Visual materials for the promotion of the theme are available to download from the IMO website in English (click here for direct access) and will soon be available in all the other Organization's official languages: Arabic, Chinese, French, Russian and Spanish. In addition, the Secretary-General's formal message on this year's theme will be distributed in due course.

4 In order to promote the theme more widely, Member Governments and observer organizations are encouraged to organize, wherever possible, suitable events throughout the year and inform the Secretariat of any planned activities. Social media participation is also encouraged via X (formerly Twitter) by using the hashtag **#WorldMaritimeDay**. Photographs of the events can also be sent to: media@imo.org.

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ANNEX

WORLD MARITIME DAY THEME FOR 2025

OUR OCEAN – OUR OBLIGATION – OUR OPPORTUNITY

Background paper

INTRODUCTION

The ocean is indispensable for the continued existence of humanity. It produces half of the planet's oxygen and is responsible for providing food, jobs and recreation for a large portion of the world's population, fostering economic growth. Over three billion people rely on food from the sea as a source of protein and key nutrients. The ocean also regulates the planet's climate by absorbing carbon dioxide and heat, mitigating the impacts of climate change. Protecting the ocean is not merely a matter of environmental conservation to safeguard its invaluable biodiversity but a necessity for the well-being and survival of humanity and the stability of the Earth's ecosystems.

As a cornerstone of transportation and global business, the ocean is vital for the world's economy, with more than 80% of trade using sea routes to move goods around the globe. It is also a source of jobs for millions of people. Shipping, as the largest user of the ocean space, naturally also plays a central role in the management and protection of its resources, closely collaborating with other users of the ocean in areas such as fisheries, tourism, research and exploration of marine resources.

Since the adoption of the United Nation's (UN) 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) in 2015, in particular SDG 14 on *Life below water*, Member States and the global community have taken a number of concrete steps to further strengthen the management of the ocean space and its resources. But in a wider sense, the theme is also linked to SDG 13 on *Climate action* and other SDGs, including but not limited to SDG 9 on *Industry, innovation and infrastructure* and SDG 17 on *Partnerships*.

The theme for 2025 provides flexibility to the IMO Secretariat, Member States and observer organizations to highlight the importance of IMO's work in the context of the ongoing global efforts to protect the ocean from the myriad of threats it faces from human activities. It will also showcase the deep interconnection of shipping and IMO with other stakeholders and sectors in the marine environment, highlighting the importance of collaboration and coordination to ensure the sustainable and safe utilization of ocean resources.

THE UNITED NATIONS AND THE OCEAN

The UN plays a crucial role in protecting the world's oceans through various initiatives, treaties and specialized agencies. Recognizing the importance of the oceans for human well-being and the health of the planet, as they regulate climate, provide food and sustain biodiversity, the UN has established a framework for ocean governance, conservation and sustainable use. By fostering international cooperation, setting global standards and advancing ocean science, the UN helps ensure that the oceans continue to thrive for future generations.

United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS)

The UN's primary tool for governing the oceans is UNCLOS, adopted in 1982. Often referred to as the "Constitution for the Oceans", UNCLOS provides the legal framework for the use and conservation of the seas and their resources. It establishes rules for maritime boundaries (definition of national territorial waters, exclusive economic zones (EEZs) and the high seas, helping to manage jurisdiction over ocean resources), resource management (a structure for the sustainable use of marine resources, such as fishing and seabed mining), marine environment protection (obliges signatories to take measures to prevent, reduce and control pollution of the marine environment from land-based sources, ships and other activities) and dispute resolution (mechanisms for settling disputes over maritime boundaries, resource use and environmental damage). UNCLOS has been critical in promoting cooperation among nations to manage the ocean's resources sustainably and has helped mitigate conflicts over territorial claims and fishing rights.

The relationship between UNCLOS and IMO is one of synergy and complementarity. UNCLOS provides the overarching legal framework for the governance of the world's oceans, including the protection of the marine environment and the regulation of navigation. IMO, in turn, develops the technical standards and regulations that make the provisions of UNCLOS effective, particularly in areas like maritime safety and prevention and control of marine pollution. Together, they ensure that maritime activities are conducted responsibly, sustainably and safely, benefiting both the environment and global trade.

Sustainable Development Goal 14: Life below water

SDG 14 focuses on the conservation and sustainable use of the oceans, seas and marine resources, including targets that aim to reduce marine pollution (prevent and significantly reduce marine pollution by 2025, particularly from land-based activities, such as plastic waste and nutrient runoff), sustainably manage fisheries (elimination of overfishing and illegal, unreported, and unregulated (IUU) fishing, while promoting sustainable fishing practices), conserve marine ecosystems (protection of at least 30% of marine and coastal areas by 2030, ensuring the preservation of biodiversity and ecosystem services) and combat ocean acidification (minimize the impacts of ocean acidification, a result of increasing carbon dioxide levels that threaten marine life). The UN monitors progress toward the targets and encourages Member States to implement policies that align with these global objectives.

2025 UN Ocean Conference to support SDG 14

In 2017, the UN convened the first UN Ocean Conference to support the implementation of SDG 14, co-hosted by Fiji and Sweden at UN Headquarters in New York. The second Ocean Conference was held in 2022, co-hosted by Kenya and Portugal in Lisbon, Portugal; and the third conference will be held in June 2025 in Nice, France, co-hosted by Costa Rica and France, under the theme "Accelerating action and mobilizing all actors to conserve and sustainably use the ocean". IMO will play an active part in the third UN Ocean Conference.

United Nations Decade of Ocean Science for Sustainable Development (2021–2030)

The UN declared the years 2021 to 2030 as the Decade of Ocean Science for Sustainable Development, an initiative led by IOC/UNESCO. The Decade is aimed at advancing scientific knowledge, improving ocean monitoring and fostering international cooperation to address the challenges facing the oceans. Key objectives include the mapping of the entire ocean floor by 2030, providing critical data for marine planning and conservation; improving the global understanding of ocean ecosystems and promoting innovations in marine conservation; and supporting SDG 14, focussing on building the scientific capacity needed to meet its targets.

IMO is currently represented on the Decade Advisory Board, providing strategic advice on its implementation.

Biodiversity Beyond National Jurisdiction (BBNJ) Agreement

In June 2023, a new legally binding international instrument under UNCLOS regulating the oceans, 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* (BBNJ Agreement), was adopted (A/CONF.232/2023/4), following almost two decades of negotiations. IMO provided relevant input throughout the negotiations of the text of the Agreement. As of December 2024, the Agreement has been signed by 105 countries, with 15 having ratified it (the treaty requires 60 ratifications to enter into force).

The BBNJ Agreement fills a significant gap in ocean governance by addressing issues like the sustainable use of marine genetic resources, environmental impact assessments, and the establishment of marine protected areas (MPAs) in international waters (the high seas). IMO plays a critical role in global maritime governance, particularly in regulating activities related to shipping and preventing pollution from ships. While the BBNJ Agreement and IMO operate within different scopes – BBNJ focuses on conservation and sustainable use of marine biodiversity in international waters, while IMO focuses on safety, security and environmental standards for ships – their efforts complement each other in promoting sustainable ocean management.

Through its conventions, guidelines and technical cooperation activities, IMO contributes to achieving the BBNJ's goals by ensuring that the maritime sector adheres to strict environmental standards and supports the sustainable use of ocean resources. The collaboration between the BBNJ Agreement and IMO is essential to achieving a balance between economic development in the maritime sector and the protection of fragile marine ecosystems on the high seas.

UN Environment Assembly (UNEA) – Global Plastics Treaty

In March 2022, UNEA adopted a resolution entitled "End plastic pollution: Towards an international legally binding instrument" (UNEA resolution 5/14), deciding to develop an instrument on plastic pollution, including in the marine environment.

The UN's work on a global plastic treaty represents a significant step forward in the fight against plastic pollution. By addressing the problem through a comprehensive, legally binding agreement, the treaty has the potential to transform the way plastics are produced, used and managed worldwide. If successful, the treaty could lead to significant reductions in plastic waste and its harmful impacts on marine ecosystems, wildlife, and human health, advancing the UN's broader environmental and sustainability goals.

IMO has been actively addressing plastic pollution from the maritime industry, particularly from ship-based sources, as part of its broader mandate to protect the marine environment. IMO's extensive experience in regulating ship-sourced pollution, including plastic waste, positions it as a key contributor to discussions on how to integrate maritime sources into broader global efforts to reduce plastic pollution.

IMO is also one of the four permanent members of the Global Partnership on Plastic Pollution and Marine Litter (GPML) Steering Committee (together with UNEP, FAO and GESAMP). The GPML is a multi-stakeholder partnership which brings together all the actors working on marine litter and plastic pollution prevention and reduction.

UN Environment Programme (UNEP)

UNEP is one of the key agencies working to protect marine ecosystems through various initiatives and coordinates international efforts to address ocean pollution, marine biodiversity loss and the impacts of climate change on the marine environment. Key areas of UNEP's work include the Global Programme of Action for the Protection of the Marine Environment from Land-based Activities, which focuses on reducing pollution sources such as plastics, chemicals and wastewater entering the oceans; support for the creation and management of MPAs, which serve as sanctuaries for marine life and help restore ecosystems; and global initiatives to protect coral reefs, which are essential for marine biodiversity and coastal protection but are under threat from warming oceans and acidification.

UN Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO)

FAO plays a central role in managing global fisheries and promoting sustainable fishing practices. Overfishing poses a significant threat to marine ecosystems and food security, and FAO's work is essential in mitigating these challenges. Their contributions include the development of a Code of Conduct for Responsible Fisheries (provides principles and standards for the sustainable use of fisheries, including protecting fish stocks and marine habitats); monitoring global fish stocks (tracking the status of fish stocks around the world and advising countries on policies to prevent overfishing); and combating IUU fishing, which threatens fish populations and undermines sustainable fisheries management.

Intergovernmental Oceanographic Commission (IOC)

IOC is hosted by the UN Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) and coordinates international scientific research and monitoring of the world's oceans, including leading efforts to study the effects of climate change on oceans, such as rising sea levels, ocean warming, and acidification; promoting global cooperation in marine science, ensuring that countries have access to critical data for decision-making and ocean management; and supporting the development of tsunami early warning systems, which help protect coastal communities from natural disasters.

Kunming-Montreal Global Biodiversity Framework (GBF)

The GBF was adopted during the fifteenth meeting of the Conference of the Parties (COP 15) to the Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD decision 15/14) in December 2022. The framework aims to halt and reverse nature loss and consists of global targets to be achieved by 2030 and beyond to safeguard and sustainably use biodiversity across terrestrial and marine environments.

The GBF has far-reaching implications for the maritime sector. It encourages the protection, restoration and sustainable use of marine ecosystems, requiring shipping, fisheries and marine resource extraction industries to adopt practices that minimize their impact on ocean biodiversity. By aligning with the GBF, the maritime industry can play a key role in halting and reversing biodiversity loss in marine environments, contributing to global efforts to preserve ocean health for future generations. IMO's regulatory frameworks, such as the International Convention for the Prevention of Pollution from Ships (MARPOL) Annexes I to VI, including the associated 2023 IMO GHG Strategy and the establishment of Particularly Sensitive Sea Areas (PSSA), and the Ballast Water Management (BWM) Convention, are essential tools in achieving the GBF's relevant targets, including those relating to area-based measures, invasive species, pollution and climate change. IMO works in close collaboration with CBD and other international bodies to ensure that maritime activities do not threaten marine biodiversity.

THE ORGANIZATION AND THE OCEAN

As a UN specialized agency with responsibility for the safety and security of shipping and the prevention of marine and atmospheric pollution by ships, IMO plays a critical role in ensuring that the world's oceans remain clean, safe and sustainable. IMO's work to protect the world's oceans spans across a wide range of areas, including control of marine pollution, maritime safety and sustainable shipping, and its efforts significantly contribute to the preservation of marine ecosystems globally.

The work of the Organization on the prevention of pollution of the marine environment is, in the main, directed by the Marine Environment Protection Committee (MEPC), IMO's senior technical body on marine pollution related matters. It is aided in its work by a number of IMO's Sub-Committees, in particular the Sub-Committee on Pollution Prevention and Response (PPR).

IMO also provides the Secretariat for the Convention on the Prevention of Marine Pollution by Dumping of Wastes and Other Matter 1972 (London Convention, LC) and its 1996 Protocol (London Protocol, LP), the treaties that set the global regulations to prevent pollution from dumping of wastes and other matter at sea. The LC, one of the first global conventions to protect the marine environment from human activities, has been in force since 1975. The current LC/LP agenda deals with issues such as marine geoengineering, carbon capture and sequestration, marine litter and microplastics, marine disposal of mine tailings and the deposition of materials jettisoned during the launch of space vehicles, among many others.

The Joint Group of Experts on the Scientific Aspects of Marine Environmental Protection (GESAMP) is a group of experts that since 1969 has advised the UN system on scientific aspects of marine environmental protection. IMO represents GESAMP (Administrative Secretary) and hosts the GESAMP Office. GESAMP is presently sponsored by ten UN agencies with interests and responsibilities in marine environmental matters and provides a cross-sectoral, interdisciplinary and science-based approach to international policy development in marine environmental affairs through coordination and cooperation among the agencies. Currently active GESAMP Working Groups are dealing with issues such as evaluation of environmental hazards of harmful substances carried by ships, approval of Ballast Water Management systems, impacts of marine geoengineering on the marine environment, marine mineral mining and life cycle GHG intensity of marine fuels.

IMO's role in marine environmental protection

One of IMO's most notable contributions to ocean preservation is its leadership in establishing global standards to prevent marine pollution from ships. The most important IMO instrument in this regard is MARPOL, addressing various forms of ship-borne pollution, including oil, chemicals, sewage, garbage and air pollution. It is widely regarded as one of the most comprehensive and effective international agreements for safeguarding the marine environment.

MARPOL Annexes I, II and III, which deal with the prevention of pollution by oil, harmful substances and chemicals, were ground-breaking in setting mandatory standards for ship construction and operations that minimize the risk of oil spills. These regulations have led to a dramatic reduction in accidental discharges of oil into the ocean, particularly after the amendments requiring tankers to be fitted with double-hulls entered into force. Annex IV regulates the discharge of sewage into the sea from ships, including regulations regarding ships' equipment and systems for the control of sewage discharge and the provision of port reception facilities for sewage. Annex V tackles garbage disposal and specifically prohibits the dumping of plastics at sea, reflecting IMO's commitment to addressing the growing problem of marine litter and microplastics, which pose significant threats to marine life.

In recent years, IMO has increasingly focused on reducing the impact of air pollution from ships, which can indirectly harm oceanic health. The adoption of the IMO 2020 sulphur cap, a global regulation limiting sulphur content in ships' fuel to 0.5%, was a landmark decision aimed at reducing sulphur oxide emissions, a major contributor to ocean acidification and coastal pollution. Stricter controls over ship emissions will not only lead to cleaner air but also healthier marine ecosystems, particularly in coastal areas impacted by shipping activities. IMO also put into place binding requirements reducing nitrogen oxide emissions from ships engines, as well as guidelines aimed at the reduction of Black Carbon emissions from international shipping.

IMO has been instrumental in developing guidelines for the safe and sustainable use of marine resources. For example, IMO has supported the development of FAO's Code of Conduct for Responsible Fisheries, working in partnership with FAO to promote sustainable fishing practices. This initiative helps to prevent overfishing and protect marine ecosystems from depletion.

Through its conventions, standards and collaborative efforts, IMO influences the policies and practices of the maritime industry, shaping sustainable ocean governance and ensuring safe, secure and environmentally sound shipping worldwide. Some of the most important areas of IMO's work in this regard are explained in more detail below.

Addressing climate change

IMO is very actively working to mitigate the effects of climate change on the world's oceans. Shipping is responsible for about 3% of global GHG emissions and without action, this percentage could rise as global trade grows. Recognizing this, IMO adopted its 2023 IMO GHG Strategy, setting ambitious targets for reducing the sector's emissions, including reaching net zero by or about (i.e. close to) 2050.

IMO's work on promoting energy efficiency in shipping has been key in the drive towards decarbonization. The Energy Efficiency Design Index (EEDI), introduced in 2011, requires new ships to meet increasingly stringent energy efficiency standards. This is supplemented by the mandatory Ship Energy Efficiency Management Plan (SEEMP), Energy Efficiency Existing Ship Index (EEXI) and Carbon Intensity Indicator (CII), which jointly encourage continuous operational energy efficiency improvements of the existing fleet and retrofitting of older ships to reduce fuel consumption. These initiatives have catalysed innovation in green shipping technologies, such as wind-assisted propulsion, LNG-powered ships and the use of low/zero carbon alternative marine fuels, all of which will play a crucial role in reducing the maritime industry's carbon footprint.

IMO's forward-thinking approach positions the Organization at the forefront of global efforts to combat climate change and ensure the long-term sustainability of the oceans.

Tackling invasive species

Another critical aspect of IMO's work to protect the oceans is the prevention of the spread of invasive species through the management of ballast water and biofouling. Ballast water is taken on by ships to ensure stability during transit and is often discharged in different locations, potentially introducing harmful aquatic organisms to new ecosystems. Biofouling, which is the undesirable accumulation of various aquatic organisms on ships' hulls, is also considered one of the main vectors for bio invasions. These invasive species can have devastating effects on marine biodiversity, outcompeting native species and altering the balance of ecosystems, and the damage to the environment is often irreversible. Moreover, this has a significant economic impact on industries that depend on the coastal and marine environment, such as tourism, aquaculture and fisheries, as well as causing costly damage to coastal infrastructure.

To address these matters, IMO adopted the BWM Convention, which entered into force in 2017. The Convention requires ships to manage ballast water to a given standard and prohibits the discharge of ballast water not managed accordingly. This has been a major step forward in preventing the spread of harmful organisms and protecting marine biodiversity, particularly in coastal and enclosed waters where ecosystems are often more vulnerable. Moreover, IMO has developed Biofouling Guidelines, originally adopted in 2011 and revised in 2023, which represent a decisive step towards further reducing the transfer of invasive aquatic species by ships by providing a globally consistent approach to the management of biofouling.

Dealing with plastic pollution

The regulations in MARPOL Annex V and LC/LP prohibit the discharge and dumping of plastics from ships, respectively. To further address marine plastic pollution, MEPC adopted an *Action Plan to Address Marine Plastic Litter from Ships*, together with an accompanying Strategy to prevent marine plastic litter from entering the oceans through ship-based activities.

Key developments since the adoption of the Action Plan include the adoption of pertinent amendments to MARPOL Annex V; the inclusion of relevant training provisions in the new STCW-F Code covering environmental awareness of fishers; new International Convention for the Safety of Life at Sea (SOLAS) and MARPOL requirements concerning reporting of lost and drifting freight containers; ongoing work to enhance the reporting of lost fishing gear, in cooperation with FAO; the approval of *Recommendations for the carriage of plastic pellets by sea in freight containers* to prevent ship-source plastic pellets spills from occurring, together with complementing *Guidelines on good practice relating to clean-up of plastic pellets from ship-source releases;* as well as the establishment of IMO's GloLitter Partnerships project to assist developing countries in preventing and reducing marine litter, particularly plastic, in the maritime transport and fisheries sectors.

IMO is committed to continue working closely with partners on reducing plastic pollution, including FAO, GESAMP, UNEP and the Global Partnership on Marine Litter (GPML).

Reducing underwater noise

Continuous noise onboard ships can not only have an adverse impact on human health, but studies have also shown that underwater-radiated noise from commercial ships may have both short and long-term negative consequences for marine life, especially marine mammals. When the issue of underwater noise and its impact on marine mammals was first raised at IMO in 2004, it was noted that continuous anthropogenic noise in the ocean was primarily generated by shipping. Since ships routinely cross international boundaries, it is obvious that the management of such noise requires a coordinated international response.

Following the approval of revised *Guidelines for the reduction of underwater noise from commercial shipping* by MEPC in 2023, work to assist with their implementation is ongoing, also taking into account potential co-benefits and trade-offs that may exist between the reduction of underwater radiated noise from ships and energy efficiency. IMO's GloNoise Partnership Project, launched in 2023, focuses on building capacity in developing countries to implement the Guidelines in order to address adverse impacts on marine life.

Designating especially protected areas

Under MARPOL, certain sea areas can be designated as special areas, to protect particularly sensitive or vulnerable marine environments from pollution due to shipping activities. These areas are identified as requiring heightened protection because they have unique ecological, socio-economic or scientific importance and are particularly at risk from operational

discharges of oil, sewage, garbage and other pollutants from ships. In such areas, stricter standards and controls for ships operating within their boundaries are imposed. By promoting the designation of special areas, IMO helps to protect vulnerable marine environments from negative impacts of shipping, including habitat destruction, noise pollution and ship strikes on marine mammals.

Furthermore, under MARPOL, certain areas may be designated as a PSSA. Unlike special areas, which primarily focus on pollution prevention, for PSSAs a broader range of potential harms from shipping is considered, including the risk of physical damage from groundings, anchoring and other operational impacts. To be designated as a PSSA, an area must be of ecological significance, socio-economic or cultural value, or scientific or educational importance. If an area is designated as a PSSA, IMO Members can propose protective measures, which may include routing measures, mandatory reporting systems for ships passing through the area and areas to be avoided. The goal of PSSA designation is to minimize shipping-related damage, thereby preserving biodiversity, supporting sustainable economic activities and protecting valuable ecosystems from irreversible harm.

Enhancing maritime safety to protect marine resources

Apart from pollution prevention, IMO plays a crucial role in enhancing maritime safety, which has a direct impact on the protection of the world's oceans. The SOLAS Convention, one of IMO's oldest and most important conventions, establishes minimum safety standards for ship construction, equipment and operation. By preventing ship accidents and improving emergency response capabilities, SOLAS helps to reduce the risk of incidents that could result in environmental disasters, such as oil spills or hazardous cargo releases.

IMO also develops guidelines for ship operation, crew training and other instruments that enhance the safety of maritime navigation, ultimately protecting both lives and marine ecosystems.

Conclusion

IMO's extensive efforts to protect the world's oceans are both diverse and far-reaching. Through its regulations on pollution control, climate change mitigation, invasive species management and maritime safety, the Organization significantly contributes to the preservation of marine ecosystems and the promotion of sustainable ocean use. As global challenges like marine pollution, climate change and biodiversity loss continue to intensify, IMO's work is more important than ever. The Organization's commitment to innovation, cooperation and sustainable development ensures that the world's oceans will continue to support both human life and the countless species that depend on them. IMO's achievements are a testament to the power of international collaboration in tackling the most pressing environmental issues of our time.