

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This report examines Canada's performance and recommends improvements on the United Nations Sustainable Development Goal 14: Life below water. Canada ranks second lowest among the G7 countries with respect to SDG14 performance and average as compared to G20 countries. In 2019, Fisheries and Oceans Canada classified less than 50% of Canadian stocks of fish and marine mammals on which data was available, as healthy (Statistics Canada, 2022). The United Nations Second World Ocean Assessment presents a grim picture of the future of fish stocks if immediate and dramatic action is not taken.

Canada was the first country in the world to develop comprehensive legislation governing its oceans with the Oceans Act. This legislation is regularly maintained and updated. The federal government has recently made significant financial commitments for marine protection and oceans research. Coastal areas designated for protection have increased to 14.6% of the total Canadian Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ) from 1% in 2015.

Unfortunately, this has not stopped the decline of marine habitat. Today, this decline not only needs to be stopped, but reversed. Marine ecosystems are poorly understood, and research is ongoing, but it has been seen that species recovery can happen in as little time as a human generation or two if the right actions are put in place. For example, large whales have recovered from near extinction in the last century due to global conservation efforts.

The governance and management framework for oceans management and policy making in Canada is inconsistent. There are at least four federal agencies with jurisdiction over Canada's oceans and lakes. Primary responsibility rests with the Department of Fisheries and Oceans (DFO), in accordance with the Oceans Act; however, the DFO is also responsible for managing the fishing economy. This may be perceived as a conflict of interest.

Canada needs to create a stronger framework for consistent measurable management and indicators for oceans management and health. Recommendations for improvement are:

A. Strengthen the governance framework for Oceans Management

- Create or assign a single agency with sustainability as its only mandate with authority to define and assign work for the completion of management plans.
- This agency should review international best practices for oceans management to inform policy.
- This agency should define and report on measurable indicators

B. Strengthen the management framework for Canada's EEZ

- 5-, 10- and 20-year plans need to be developed to create an integrated network of protected areas
- Management plans should carry legal force
- Outcomes need to be measured with an accountability framework

C. Continue investments in fisheries policies to improve balance between sustainability and human wellbeing

- Review and update existing policies
- Continue the recent initiatives in coastal patrols and monitoring to reduce illegal fishing and monitor pollution
- Work towards a complete ban on bottom-trawling

Having a consistent framework with measurable indicators will facilitate the gathering of data to understand changes in marine ecosystems and identifying the impacts of specific actions. This will also provide an objective methodology for assessments of economic activities and assist with an improved balance of sustainability with economic prosperity.