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Building Bridges for Ocean Sustainability: The Evolution and Impact of the Early Career Ocean Professional (ECOP) Programme

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ECOP Programme

Introduction

The Early Career Ocean Professional (ECOP) Programme was endorsed as a global network program of the United Nations Decade of Ocean Science for Sustainable Development (2021-2030) (herein referred to as the “UN Ocean Decade”) in June 2021. Since then, it has been supporting ECOPs around the world by providing meaningful funding, training, networking, and career development opportunities, and creating capacity for cooperation and knowledge exchange.

However, the story of the ECOP Programme began much earlier, when in May 2019, during the first Global Planning Meeting of the UN Ocean Decade in Copenhagen, it was noticed that early career professionals were largely missing and there was an urgent need to ensure their active engagement both in the preparatory phase of the UN Ocean Decade and in its actual development until 2030. This realization led to the setup of an Informal Working Group for the Ocean Decade in late 2019, which later progressed into the ECOP Programme.

The Programme’s vision is to elevate and strengthen the diverse perspectives of new generations of ocean professionals through a collective voice, ensuring that knowledge is transferred between experienced professionals and ECOPs to promote ocean sustainability for “The Ocean We Want” (Kostianaia, 2022). An ECOP is a “person that self-identifies as being early in their career, within 10 years or less of professional experience in any field related to the ocean. This definition includes post-secondary students and any volunteer roles, so not only employed/paid positions.

ABSTRACT

Since its endorsement as a global network Programme in June 2021, the Early Career Ocean Professional (ECOP) Programme has been instrumental in supporting ocean professionals worldwide through funding, training, networking opportunities, and career development initiatives. Rooted in the vision of elevating diverse perspectives, the ECOP Programme fosters knowledge exchange between experienced professionals and ECOPs to promote ocean sustainability. As the UN Decade of Ocean Science for Sustainable Development (2021-2030) enters its fourth year of implementation, the ECOP Programme has grown and diversified to a formidable extent, both geographically and thematically. With over 5,200 ECOPs from 151 countries and overseas territories, the global ECOP community is currently dispersed across five regional nodes and more than 40 national hubs. This commentary brings some of the most active ECOP nodes into the limelight, amplifying their collective efforts to better understand, engage, and empower the next generation of ocean professionals across different cultural contexts. This is also an opportunity to showcase the successes, milestones, and challenges that ECOP nodes have encountered over the past 2 years, including on thematic priorities such as communications and outreach, capacity development, and ocean literacy. Moving forward, the ECOP Programme aims to further expand geographically, enhance funding capacities, deepen capacity development efforts, and promote greater awareness of the UN Ocean Decade ecosystem and its vast portfolio of endorsed Actions. As the next generation of ocean professionals will inherit our interconnected ocean beyond 2030, building trust, transferring knowledge, and taking true ownership of the global ocean agenda are paramount. Keywords: capacity development, ECOPs, global network, ocean literacy, UN Ocean Decade

The term ‘professional’ is used in order to be inclusive of professionals from various sectors of society.”

A significant portion of the current ECOP Programme’s activities were shaped by the results of the global survey launched by the Informal Working Group in late 2019. Seven different task teams, of which four remain today: (1) Ocean Literacy, (2) Training & Mentoring, (3) Diversity, Equity and Inclusivity, and (4) OceanBRIDGES (which bridges ocean research, innovation, and diversity across generations of experts and stakeholders), were strategically crafted in alignment with the global survey findings, signifying a responsive approach to the expressed needs of ECOPs. Such approach remains

true to this day, with the many regional and national needs-assessment surveys launched to understand and respond to local ECOPs’ needs and challenges. The results of these surveys have been analyzed and presented in the form of reports, which are publicly accessible on the ECOP website. The surveys and reports will inform further strategies for the activities of the nodes and contribute to the ECOP Programme as a whole, thus serving as an effective means to gather continuous feedback from the ECOP community, fostering new relationships and trust (Satterthwaite et al., 2022), and revealing regional and national nuances.

Since the Spring of 2022, when Kostianaia (2022) was published,

our global ECOP membership has more than quintupled, increasing from 900 to more than 5,200 ECOPs, coming from 151 different countries. In mid-2022, the ECOP Programme only had three established nodes in Africa, Asia, and Canada. Today, as of June 2024, five regional and 52 national ECOP nodes have been established or are currently in the making (Figure 1).

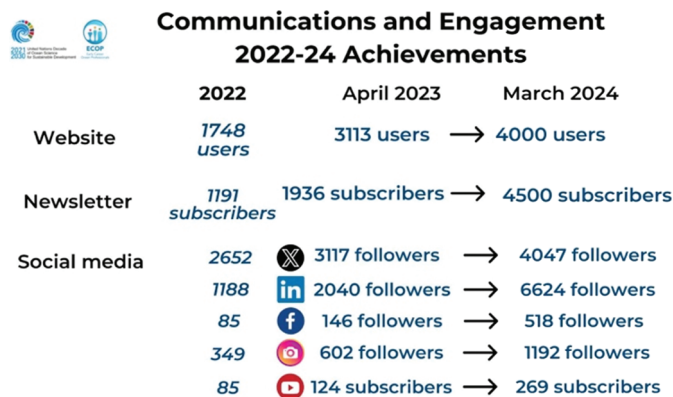
ECOP Communications and Engagement

The ECOP Programme has three main communications tools, its (1) website, (2) monthly newsletter, and (3) social media channels, namely, Twitter (X), LinkedIn, Facebook, Instagram, and YouTube. Progress made over the past 2 years is summarized in Figure 2.

It also creates campaigns to engage the ECOP community, promote their work, and raise the visibility and value of ECOPs in the UN Ocean Decade.

FIGURE 2

Evolution of the ECOP Programme's social media analytics, including engagement, reach, and growth (2022-2024).



For instance, “ECOP Stories” is a series that started in 2021 to showcase the diverse community of ECOPs and their work from around the world. In 2023, the “My Coastline” campaign was launched, with the aim of connecting with the wider ECOP community. Through video submissions, participants from Italy, Kenya, Sudan, Senegal, Madagascar, Nigeria, and Portugal shared where

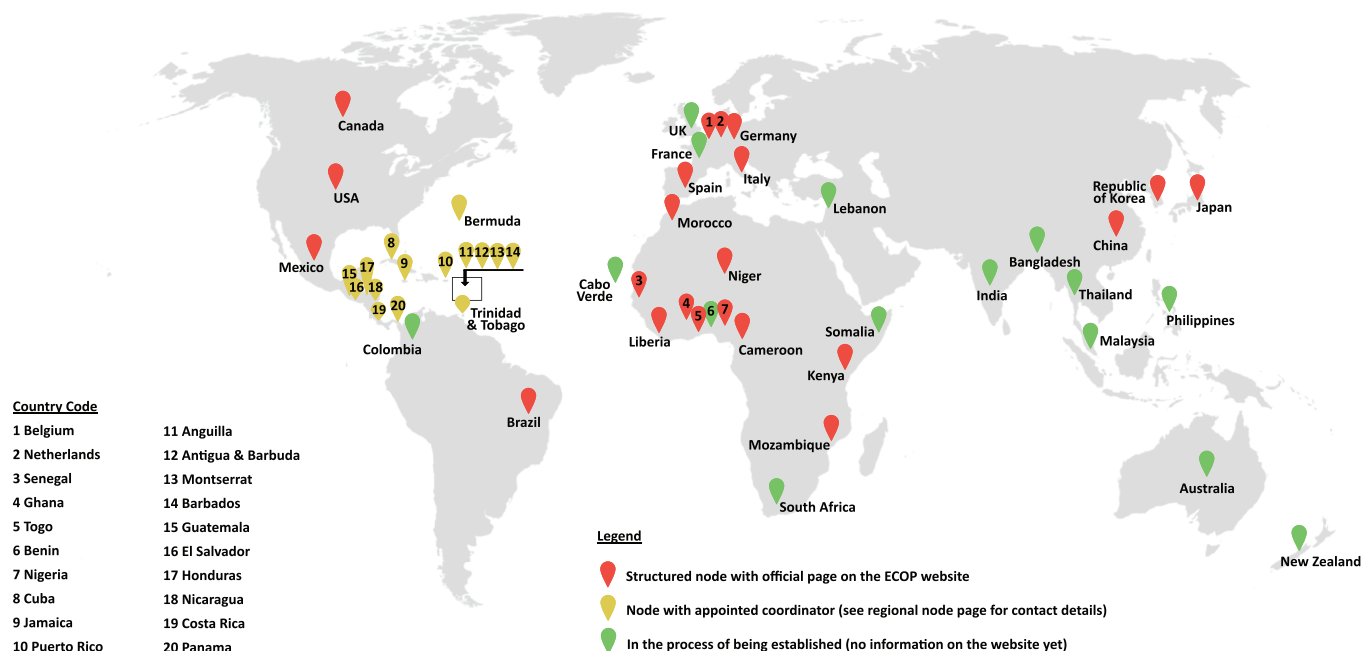
they live, highlighting the threats and issues surrounding their coastline, and what they are doing to help their local “blue spaces.”

Regional and National ECOP Nodes

As one of the first established nodes, ECOP Africa has taken a

FIGURE 1

Global distribution of national ECOP nodes (as of June 2024). The accompanying legend identifies the current status of each node.



number of measures to establish itself firmly for maximum positive impact in Africa. The first step was to conduct a stocktaking survey across Africa, focusing on the needs, priorities, and challenges of African ECOPs working in the marine space and other closely related fields. ECOP Africa has adopted a hierarchical structure consisting of sub-regional and national nodes, and technical working groups on ocean literacy, capacity development, co-design, and indigenous knowledge. They aim to unite and empower ECOPs to promote sustainability and transfer knowledge for an inclusive blue growth.

At the sub-regional level, the North Africa and Mediterranean Sea node acknowledges that, despite achievements in countries along the Northern African shore and regional actions to fill gaps, the situation in the Mediterranean South is particularly alarming. Balanced coordination and governance between the two shores of the Mediterranean Sea are vital to closing gaps in aspects related to research, technology, economy, and governance. The sub-regional node is actively working to address these obstacles by bringing together national coordinators from both shores of the Mediterranean Sea to collaborate on project ideas and initiatives. Additionally, they are co-organizing cross-disciplinary conferences focused on addressing the 10 Ocean Decade Challenges.

At the national level, ECOP Nigeria has established webinars and advocacy committees to increase awareness about the node and UN Ocean Decade, submitted grant proposals, and started to engage more in ocean literacy among primary and secondary school students. However, lack of financial support remains a pervasive issue. In Ghana, the coordi-

nating team aims to enhance the capacities and skills of ECOPs and amplify their impact at the local and international level. They intend to establish a “match-making” service to connect ECOPs with international training programs and other relevant opportunities. Finally, with 180 registered ECOPs, the Kenyan node has benefited from capacity building activities, mentorship programs, training, ocean literacy practical sessions, and national and international opportunities for partnership and decision-making.

ECOP Asia

Launched in June 2021, the ECOP Asia node strives to develop and nurture a vibrant, engaged, action-oriented, and inclusive regional ECOP community in Asia. Spanning 35 countries from Saudi Arabia in the Middle East to Indonesia in Southeast Asia, the network has experienced remarkable growth over the past 2 years. Since April 2022, the ECOP Asia community has grown from 228 registered members to over 1,200. While the largest ECOP audiences are based in India (304), China (183), Bangladesh (154), the Republic of Korea (116), Malaysia (85), and the Philippines (81), representation gaps remain in Central and West Asia, as well as in parts of Southeast Asia.

With six established and self-regulating nodes in Bangladesh, China, India, Japan, Malaysia, and the Republic of Korea, and one working group on Ocean Literacy, ECOP Asia keeps expanding its horizons and ambitions further. Over the past 2 years, ECOP Asia has been running a successful internship scheme in partnership with the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO). This initiative provides young graduate

students with leadership skills, networking opportunities, and unique exposure to international working environments and global sustainability agendas. The team has also conducted seven needs assessment surveys at both regional and national levels. The findings and insights garnered from these surveys (Roman, 2024) have been compiled into several publicly available reports. With more than 25 core team members and 50 institutional collaborators, ECOP Asia has evolved into a dynamic “network of networks,” with a diverse portfolio of ECOP-led activities, including three symposiums, ten workshops, one free virtual training on ocean data analysis, and four webinars.

In 2024, ECOP Asia plans to enhance its support base by strengthening relationships with key regional actors of the Ocean Decade ecosystem and fostering new partnerships to stimulate capacity development and attract additional funding sources. Besides pushing for greater representation and participation of ECOPs in high-level dialogues and conferences, new tangible initiatives are being developed to allow Asian ECOPs to take true ownership of the UN Ocean Decade.

ECOP Canada

Started in 2021, ECOP Canada aims to achieve intergenerational equity by strengthening the diverse voices of ECOPs in all ocean fields across Canada. The node is composed of a rotating Steering Committee (three ECOPs), one national coordinator, and an advisory board of 14 ECOPs.

ECOP Canada has over 400 members and has partnered with over 30 international and national organizations. Through these partnerships, ECOP Canada is actively expanding its network and launching

initiatives to promote ECOP inclusion. These efforts include sending delegations to key conferences, conducting workshops and webinars, establishing a career connector program, and curating resources and training opportunities for ECOPs across sectors.

Over the last 2 years, ECOP Canada's key milestones include support to 40 ECOPs, facilitating their attendance at 18 major conferences globally. Additionally, ECOP Canada has developed a toolkit for Ocean Week Canada in French and English, empowering ECOPs to engage with Canada's blue economy. ECOP Canada has engaged over 700 ECOPs in the Decade framework through presentations and workshops at prominent events. Moreover, ECOP participation in Canada's Ocean Decade Community of Champions has been bolstered.

However, ECOP Canada faces challenges, notably a lack of funding to sustain existing and future programming. Despite this, the node is actively seeking funding opportunities and remains committed to fostering meaningful ECOP inclusion. With support from collaborating institutions, ECOP Canada aims to continue its mission by growing membership from all of Canada's coasts, co-developing professional development opportunities, supporting conference and event funding, launching a career connector program, and broadening national and international partnerships.

ECOP Central America

Established in September 2022, the Central American node is composed of a regional coordinator; national coordination units in Guatemala, Honduras, El Salvador, Nicaragua, Costa Rica, and Panama;

and a communications team. The node's vision is to enhance and make more visible the contribution of Central American ECOPs to the UN Ocean Decade at national, regional, and international levels through the creation of cross-sectoral networks and knowledge exchange. At the regional level, a monthly newsletter is generated to disseminate relevant news, opportunities (internships, jobs, scholarships), training, and events (seminars, workshops, symposia). Furthermore, a webinar is organized every other month, during which the work of various distinguished professionals from Central America is presented. At the national level, each node has established close cooperation with the Sustainable Ocean Alliance to organize events. Finally, a recent survey was conducted to identify the barriers, needs, and interests of ECOPs in the region.

ECOP Italy

Established in April 2023, the ECOP Italy node originated from discussions within Italy's National Decade Committee (NDC), with the aim of engaging Italian youth and professionals. This expanding ECOP network advocates for the ocean, serves as career role models, and facilitates learning opportunities. An initial milestone was the launch of a national survey identifying barriers to ECOP engagement in the UN Ocean Decade and career advancement in Italy. Survey results will guide the collaborative development of ECOP Italy's Strategic Plan with the NDC.

ECOP Spain

The Spanish node of the ECOP Programme was established in 2023 to unite ECOPs from diverse back-

grounds and sectors. While the Spanish community exhibits a strong interest in ocean conservation, its focus tends to center on research and academia. Initial survey results have revealed a demand among Spanish ECOPs for increased employment opportunities, community engagement, networking avenues, and training initiatives. This national network serves as a collaborative platform facilitating knowledge exchange among scientists, the private sector, public entities, and civil society. By fostering interdisciplinary collaboration, ECOP Spain strives to mobilize individuals across sectors to collectively address common ocean conservation objectives.

ECOP USA

The USA ECOP node was inspired by the development of the global Programme and other regional nodes and conversations. Drawing insights from a global survey conducted in 2019 to assess ECOP needs and priorities, the USA node initial goals were shaped by the perspectives of 250 U.S. ECOPs representing over 150 organizations. These goals include inclusive engagement, improved coordination, facilitating opportunities, networking, and securing funding and support for training initiatives. Thus, the USA ECOP node was born with the mission to draw in a diverse membership of ECOPs from a wide range of backgrounds and life experiences, listen to and identify the needs of ECOPs, and empower ECOPs to become future leaders through training and knowledge sharing opportunities.

The USA ECOP community comprises 442 members, with half of them self-identifying as from underrepresented groups. In terms of sector, 53% come from academic

organizations, 25% from government, 11% from civil society, and 8% from private/industry. Additionally, 46% of USA ECOPs consider themselves as knowledge producers, 15% as knowledge users, and 39% as both.

Thematic Working Groups and Task Teams Training and Mentoring

Capacity development has become one of the primary focus areas of the ECOP Programme strategy, with the Training and Mentoring Task Team taking responsibility for the majority of the Programme's capacity development activities. Composed of around 10 international and inter-sectoral ECOPs, the team supports overall webinar and training production and some specific initiatives, all for the personal and professional development of ECOPs.

In September 2022, the ECOP Programme launched its own webinar series, covering a wide range of topics tailored to the needs of the ECOP community. These topics encompass a diverse array of themes, including tips for starting an environmental nongovernmental organization, Blue Economy, ArcGIS applications, acoustics in underwater applications, plastics in the Pacific, Ocean Literacy in India, and the use of drones in marine science. As of June 2024, there have been 15 such webinars.

Furthermore, in cooperation with the OceanTeacher Global Academy (another endorsed Programme), four online, free training courses in ocean color remote sensing (Africa) and ocean data analysis with Python or R programming (Africa, Asia, and Central America) have been offered.

In response to the voiced need for mentorship opportunities, a database of international and regional mentorship programs was also compiled and displayed on the ECOP Programme website. Finally, in March 2024, the ECOP Programme launched their own database of funding, training, and networking opportunities, which is freely available on the website. This is meant to facilitate access to opportunities for ECOPs worldwide.

Ocean Literacy

The Ocean Literacy Task Team, together with the working group in Asia, have launched a project called the "Ocean Literacy Series." They are diligently collecting successful stories from around the world to inspire and empower individuals to achieve the UN Ocean Decade Challenge 10: "Change humanity's relationship with the ocean." This series aims to showcase innovative practices from various regions, fostering collaboration among individuals and institutions. Rooted in principles of diversity, equity, and inclusion, this project ensures representation from diverse regions, featuring stories in local languages and leveraging local resources.

Conclusion

Since the publication of Kostianaia (2022), the ECOP Programme has accomplished a lot, as exemplified by its geographic and thematic expansion, and the increased scope of its capacity development activities. Immediate priorities for the near future include:

1. Geographic expansion: setting up further regional and national nodes, including closing gaps in South America, Asia, Europe,

and the Pacific Small Island Developing States (SIDS) region;

2. Development of funding capacities: securing funds to enlarge the global core team and support ECOPs' ideas, projects, and participation in conferences and training;
3. Enhancement of the capacity development dimension: advancing the webinar and training series (including in-person courses), and implementing concrete initiatives to enable ECOPs to make a difference and take ownership of the UN Ocean Decade;
4. Better awareness of UN Ocean Decade Actions: increasing cooperation with other endorsed Programmes, Projects, and Contributions to promote their activities and engagement opportunities.

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