Blue streak

Philanthropy's key role in accelerating the transition to a sustainable ocean economy

September 2025

UBS

In a seashell

Philanthropists have a unique and powerful role to play in advancing a sustainable ocean economy. The ocean is one of the world's most valuable yet underfunded assets. It provides food, jobs, climate regulation, and biodiversity but it is under threat. Philanthropy can catalyze systemic change by restoring ecosystems, protecting biodiversity, and empowering coastal communities, all while recognizing the ocean as a vital global asset.

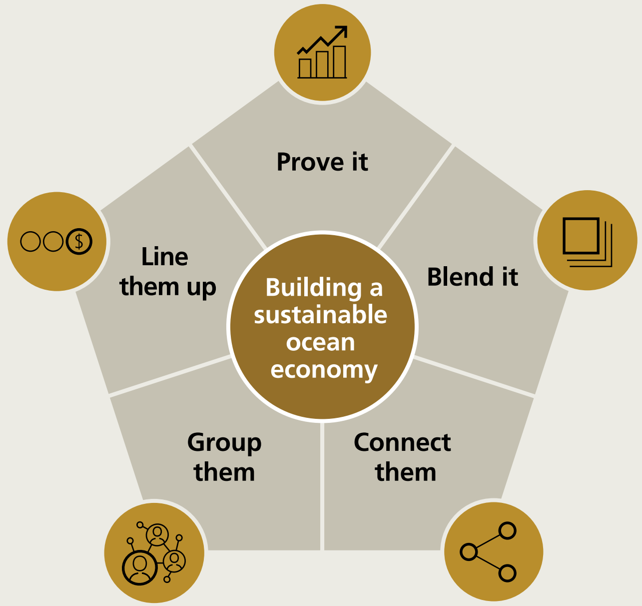
We must protect our oceans. Our lives depend on them.
Oceans produce 50% of the world's oxygen. They help regulate our climate and are home for countless fish and marine lifeforms. Underpinning the livelihoods for millions of people, they contribute to economies, locally and globally.

Yet, they are under threat.
From unsustainable fishing to acidification, biodiversity loss and pollution, the scale of these threats is made worse by a lack of appreciation and responsibility for our oceans.

Solutions exists and philanthropy can be a catalyst for change.
It's critical to preserve and ensure the regeneration of our oceans by working to build a sustainable ocean economy. From using funds to de-risk projects to fostering collaboration, philanthropy can make a unique contribution to attract investors and contribute to a world where protecting and regenerating our oceans is both possible and profitable.

What can you do?
In this publication, you'll find five strategies that you can apply to your philanthropy to act as a catalyst for change. Let yourself be inspired by real-world case studies and practical steps which you can take today.

Strategies for change



The sustainable ocean economy in numbers

25%

The ocean absorbs a quarter of human-made emissions, making it a critical buffer against climate change[1]

USD 175 bn

The annual investment needed by 2030 to create a sustainable ocean economy[3]

5th largest economy

With an economic output of USD 2.6 trn, the ocean economy would be the world's fifth largest economy if considered as a country[5]

3 bn

The number of people who rely on the ocean for over 20% of their daily protein[2]

85% funding gap

An extra USD 150 bn investment is needed to create a sustainable ocean economy, the equivalent of an 85% funding shortfall[4]

Under 1%

Despite covering 70% of the planet, less than 1% of philanthropic funding goes to the oceans[6]

1 Pörtner, H.O., D.C., et al., (2019), IPCC Special Report on the Ocean and Cryosphere in a Changing Climate
2 Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations, (2024), The State of World Fisheries and Aquaculture
3 Johansen, D.F., Rolf A.V., (2020), The cost of saving our ocean – estimating the funding gap of sustainable development goal 14, Marine Policy
4 Ibid
5 OECD (2025), The Ocean Economy to 2050, OECD Publishing
6 Scotland, P., (2022), Why we need to tackle the ocean funding crisis, Economist Impact

Why the oceans matter

Just like the seas themselves, the ocean economy is vast. According to the OECD's most recent data, the ocean economy contributed USD 2.6 tn[7] to the global economy in 2020 through factors like fishing, resource extraction, tourism, and shipping.

But every year the oceans also deliver more intangible benefits, estimated to be worth billions. For example, carbon sequestration and coastal protection.[8]

Despite their immense economic contribution, our oceans are also much more than this. For many cultures, the ocean is a spiritual and cultural touchstone, reminding us of our responsibility to protect and cherish these magnificent treasures. They nurture ecosystems, sustain livelihoods, regulate our climate, and are cradles of biodiversity. Yet we know more about the surface of other planets than we do about the sea floor. Protecting them matters – for people, planet, and prosperity.

7 OECD (2025), The Ocean Economy to 2050, OECD Publishing

8 Bertram, C., et al., (2021), The blue carbon wealth of nations, Nature Climate Change

Not all plain sailing

You don't have to look far to see the threats. David Attenborough's powerful film, Ocean, gave us a stark reminder. Climate change, overexploitation, pollution, acidification, and habitat destruction are all major issues. Many overlap and reinforce each other, creating negative feedback loops. For example, when we over-exploit fish stocks, the food webs that rely on them become increasingly strained.

How much would we need?
It's not clear exactly how much investment is needed to achieve a sustainable ocean economy. One estimate suggests that we need to spend at least USD 175 billion each year between 2020 and 2030.[9] At the same time, a recent report highlights annual investment opportunities of USD 550 billion in areas like marine conservation, ocean-based renewable energy, sustainable aquaculture, and blue infrastructure.[10] Yet despite these opportunities, there is an investment shortfall of around USD 150 billion a year.

And yet, there is so much potential. For both the planet and the economy.
In terms of value, research from the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) suggests that transitioning to a sustainable ocean economy could add USD 400 billion each year to the global economy by 2050, thanks to healthier oceans and better services.[11]

So, why is attracting large-scale investment in the sustainable ocean economy so hard?
There are several reasons: lack of track record and long payback periods, to name just two (conservation outcomes take time to materialize). These challenges are made worse by fragmented data, unclear ownership, and limited financial instruments.

Rethinking the value of blue assets

"We know that marine ecosystems generate so much social value for us. But we find a lot of difficulty in pricing them effectively because these are public goods. Creating effective, sustainable financing mechanisms is about understanding who's benefiting from improvements in biodiversity and marine health and being able to link that to paying for the cost of interventions that will improve that ecological system."

James Pilkington, The Zoological Society of London

9 An estimated USD 175 billion per year is needed through 2030 to achieve the Life Below Water Sustainable Development Goal. Source: Johansen, D.F., Rolf A.V., (2020), The cost of saving our ocean – estimating the funding gap of sustainable development goal 14, Marine Policy

10 ORRAA, (2025), Making waves in the Regenerative & Sustainable Ocean Economy: Transformative Ocean Investment Opportunities

11 Pörtner, H.O., D.C., et al., (2019), IPCC Special Report on the Ocean and Cryosphere in a Changing Climate

Global Biodiversity Framework

The Global Biodiversity Framework (GBF), adopted at COP15 in December 2022 by 196 countries, consists of 23 targets. We have outlined those which matter most for nature.[12] Their overall aims are to halt and reverse biodiversity loss by 2030, and ensure “the integrity, connectivity, and resilience of all ecosystems are maintained, enhanced, or restored” by 2050. We divide the most relevant targets for oceans into six buckets. Perhaps the most notable is the “Geography” bucket, which includes the “30 by 30” goal, targeting the protection of 30% of land and sea by 2030. Currently only 8% of oceans are designated as marine protected areas (MPAs), with less than 3% protected in practice.[13]

Geography
These include the target to ensure that at least 30% of degraded marine and coastal ecosystems are under effective restoration by 2030. The target also calls for the conservation and management of at least 30% of coastal and marine areas by 2030, via MPAs and other effective area-based conservation measures.

Impact reduction
These include targets to halt species extinction, reduce the introduction and impact of invasive species, and to cut pollution risks and impacts to non-harmful levels by 2030. Examples of the latter include halving excess nutrient runoff (e.g., from agriculture), reducing pesticide and hazardous chemical risks by half, and working toward eliminating plastic pollution.

Sustainable use
These target the sustainable management and harvesting of wild species, enabling sustainable consumption patterns to reduce waste and overconsumption, enhancing biodiversity in agriculture, aquaculture and fisheries, and seeking to widen the sharing of benefits from the ocean’s biological resources.

Climate resilience
This aims to minimize the impacts of climate change and ocean acidification on marine biodiversity by 2030. For oceans, this means protecting and restoring carbon-rich ecosystems like mangroves and seagrasses to mitigate climate impacts while enhancing resilience against acidification and warming through mitigation, adaptation, and disaster risk reduction.

Decision-making
These targets aim to fully integrate biodiversity into decision-making at all levels of government and across all sectors by 2030. They cover public and private activities, while ensuring that knowledge and data is available to guide decisions. They also seek to ensure inclusion in decision-making, with genders, minorities, and indigenous peoples represented and their interests and rights respected.

Financing
These aim to reduce harmful incentives by at least USD 500 bn each year by 2030, and mobilize USD 200 bn annually from public, private, domestic, and international sources by 2030 to increase biodiversity. As of June this year, the GBF Fund, established to support this goal, has seen pledges of USD 386 million from 12 countries.[14]

12 Convention on Biological Diversity, (2024), Consolidated guidance notes for the targets of the Kunming-Montreal Biodiversity Framework
13 Pike, E.P., et al., (2024), Ocean protection quality is lagging behind quantity: Applying a scientific framework to assess real marine protected area progress against the 30 by 30 target, Conservation Letters
14 Global Environment Facility, (2025), Global Biodiversity Framework Fund

Taking action

As a philanthropist, you understand that driving meaningful impact is never a solo endeavor. In this space, success often hinges on strong partnerships and effective policy. Yet, policy alone isn't enough – we also need to unlock greater flows of capital, including commercial investment, to support initiatives that protect, grow, and transition our ocean economy.

To attract this capital, we first need to demonstrate the ocean's economic value and then offer financing structures that align with investor expectations around risk, return, scale, and timing. This is where philanthropists like you can play a crucial role.

Many philanthropists often focus more on impact over profit. This tends to brings a higher tolerance for risk and a longer investment horizon, making it possible to incubate innovative business models and de-risk early-stage ventures. In this way, your philanthropic capital can become a powerful catalyst – mobilizing the commercial funding needed to scale solutions and accelerate change.

Turning blue natural assets into revenue-generating opportunities is complex and sometimes it may not be feasible or appropriate. However, real-world examples are already showing how philanthropic funding can unlock transformational outcomes.

Diving deeper

How can philanthropy help to monetize blue natural capital?

We outline six tools, grouped into two buckets:

1. Direct funding of projects that generate biodiversity and blue carbon credits. For example, projects that conserve and restore mangrove forests, selling 'credits' to fund conservation activities.

2. Indirect solutions that fund the preservation and regeneration of blue natural capital. Take sustainable tourism: the business depends on natural assets like coral reefs remaining intact, incentivizing their preservation.

You can also view your philanthropic contribution in a wider context beyond simply monetizing nature. We are seeing philanthropists working to bring communities, governments, finance and NGOs together. They are also advising on governance, raising awareness of new solutions, and helping connect communities selling, for example, blue carbon credits with potential buyers.

While we focus on ways to monetize nature through philanthropy in the following pages, philanthropy alone is not enough to build a sustainable ocean economy. Regulations need shaping, standards need improving, and we need to define and refine better metrics and KPIs. Funding research, and implementing new data and monitoring solutions are also critical pieces of the puzzle.[15] They are all areas where you and your fellow philanthropists can contribute.

Blue nature's value is more than a price

"Biodiversity credits are particularly promising in their aim because they try to value multiple aspects of an asset's natural value… Credits must be high integrity, i.e., verifiable, durable, robust, and priced high enough to support proper incentive structures."

David Obura, Director, CORDIO East Africa; Chair, IPBES (Intergovernmental Platform on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services)

Full interview with David Obura available here at **www.ubs.com/bluenaturevalue**

Diving deeper: Tools of the trade

The key blue nature monetization mechanisms

Maturity →

Parametric insurance	Non-carbon tradeable credits	Blue carbon	Payments for ecosystem services	Sustainable marine business	Eco-certifications
An emerging tool to price and insure natural assets so that funding is available when needed to protect and restore them	Credits rooted in improvement or maintenance of nature metrics like marine biodiversity, traded on voluntary markets	Tradeable carbon credits generated from the protection or restoration of marine assets like mangroves and seagrasses	Payments for maintaining or enhancing benefits like water purification, coastal protection, or biodiversity provided by blue natural capital	Businesses like sustainable fisheries or tourism that promote and rely on sustainable use of marine ecosystems	Labels or standards that certify products or services as sustainable allowing producers market access or to charge a premium

15 An example of the latter in the land-based nature space is Imazon, a non-profit supported by the Skoll Foundation, which developed various systems for monitoring nature impacts in the Amazon rainforest, which in turn led to the development of tools like the Global Forest Watch, a platform for real-time monitoring of forests around the world

Unlocking funding in the real world

It is one thing to describe financial tools and instruments in the abstract, but to really gauge their value and effectiveness, we need to see them in action. In this section we set out a series of real-world examples which showcase philanthropy's contribution toward building a sustainable ocean economy. We include contributions from practitioners in the space, whose testimony supports and enriches the points we make.

The UBS Optimus Foundation has been a driving force behind many of these examples. Each highlights philanthropy's importance in directing capital into a nascent space, and facilitating cooperation and collaboration, while also showcasing the range of monetization tools we outlined earlier.

In the following pages we present five strategies which could help you maximize the impact of your philanthropic capital in the emerging blue economy: 'Prove it', 'Blend it', 'Group them', 'Connect them', and 'Line them up'. We hope they provide you with guidance and inspiration.

Prove it

Problem: Early-stage, unproven marine projects often face challenges in demonstrating financial viability and sustainability. As a result, they can struggle to secure funding.

Real-world solution: Seed funding for early-stage reef regeneration initiative in the Philippines.

The UBS Optimus Foundation provided funding to Blue Alliance for an early-stage project in the Philippines. UBS-OF provided a mix of grants and impact loans, alongside expertise on impact measurement. Interest payments were linked to the achievement of impact metrics.[16] It has also paved the way for the establishment of the first impact loan facility (targeting USD 35 mn) for coral reef conservation.

Monetization tools: Sustainable marine business; Payments for ecosystem services

Funding solution: Blended finance; Grants; Impact loans

Stakeholder connection: Attracted bank capital from BNP Paribas; long-term partners with Global Fund for Coral Reefs (GFCR).

What you as a philanthropist can do to accelerate uptake of…

Payments for ecosystem services

– Facilitate and fund measurement initiatives
– Educate communities
– Connect communities with credible measurement facilities and institutions
– Facilitate and fund transactions

16 https://www.ubs.com/global/en/sustainability-impact/social-impact-and-philanthropy/optimus-foundation/our-focus-area/climate-and-environment.html#tab-345613292

Testing new business models, building track records

"Investing in the land versus the ocean is tricky because we are really dealing with different ecosystems. Land-based nature investing is about 20 years ahead of blue. The pilot impact loan facility we created with catalytic capital from UBS [Optimus Foundation] showed it was possible to attract private capital from commercial banks, but that would never have been possible a few years ago because we needed to demonstrate the model."

Nicolas Pascal, Blue Alliance

Blend it

Problem: Impact projects are often beyond the risk appetite of commercial investors.

Real-world solution: Global Fund for Coral Reefs (GFCR) Coalition.

The GFCR Coalition is a partnership of more than 50 UN member states and agencies, financial institutions, impact investors, conservation bodies, and philanthropic organizations. It uses public and philanthropic funds to catalyze further private funding, with an aim to increase the protection of approximately 12% of the Earth's remaining reefs by area while supporting over 400 reefpositive businesses.

Monetization tools: Blue carbon; Sustainable marine business; Payments for ecosystem services; Parametric insurance.

Funding solution: Blended finance

Stakeholder connection: Brought together governments, philanthropists, investors, and NGOs

What you as a philanthropist can do to accelerate uptake of…

Blue carbon

- Educate communities
- Connect communities with credible measurement facilities and institutions
- Facilitate transactions
- Provide funding for projects

Catalyzing investment

"Philanthropy and impact capital can create the "enabling conditions" that commercial capital often overlooks. At ORCA, we see philanthropy not just as a source of money, but as a catalyst for collaboration. If we get it right, philanthropic and impact capital can unlock far greater flows of commercial investment, but only if justice and equity are built into the deal."

Alasdair Harris, Ocean Resilience and Climate Alliance (ORCA)

Blended Finance

Blended finance is a structuring approach that allows diverse parties to invest alongside each other while achieving their own objectives (whether financial returns, social and environmental impact or a blend of both) using common financial market structuring techniques. The structure harnesses philanthropic or public funding to catalyze commercial investment in development. This catalytic capital attracts commercial capital by lowering investment risk and/or enhancing target returns to the point where the financial risk-return profile may be comparable to commercial projects.

Want to know more? Check out our **UBS's primer on blended finance**.[17]

17 UBS, (2024), The power to scale impact: A primer on blended finance

Group them

Problem: Individual enterprises are often too small in scale to justify or attract investment.

Real-world example: Philanthropy can use its community connections and capital to promote bundles of small projects into one financing structure, forming a larger, more investable portfolio.

In 2024, Rare, a global conservation organization, raised USD 6mn for the world's first small-uses fisheries impact bond in Indonesia, which reflects an Outcomes-Based Financing approach. It finances community-led co-management of small-scale fisheries, aggregating them to a scale that justifies investment. The initial investment will fund the bond's pilot, and investors will receive payments when certain project milestones are met and verified, such as increasing fish biomass.

Monetization tools: Sustainable marine business

Funding solution: Impact bond; Outcomes-based financing

Stakeholder connection: Aggregated small-scale fisheries, connecting them to investors and government

What you as a philanthropist can do to accelerate uptake of…

Sustainable marine business

- Fund initial investments
- Train local communities; Advise on governance
- Raise awareness; help market best practitioners
- Facilitate collaboration and partnerships

Investing in market infrastructure

"The most important things that philanthropic capital can do initially is to invest in the market infrastructure, the data flow, the convening, the constellation building, the norm creating, thereby enabling a normal market that other capital allocators can utilize. Currently that's difficult for most profit-seeking investors, because it's a small, early market."

Nigel Topping, Ambition Loop

Connect them

Problem: Insufficient connection between diverse stakeholders in finance, government, philanthropy, and local communities. The result: opportunities requiring cross-stakeholder group coordination not being grasped.

Real-world example: Insurance policy for a reef off the coast of Mexico.

In 2018, Swiss RE and other institutions, launched the first parametric insurance model to protect Mexico's Quintana Roo reef. The reef provides flood protection to the coast, absorbing up to 97% of a wave's energy, and forms the base of the area's tourism industry. The policy was triggered in 2020 following Hurricane Delta, leading to a USD 800,000 payment for restoration work.

Since then, the model has been successfully scaled. In 2022, The Nature Conservancy (TNC), in collaboration with Willis Tower Watson (WTW) launched the first coral reef insurance policy, focused on Hawaii.

Monetization tools: Parametric insurance

Funding solution: Grant-funded trust; local business tax

Stakeholder connection: Collaboration between foundations, insurers, local government, the community, and local businesses.

What you as a philanthropist can do to accelerate uptake of…

Parametric insurance

- Subsidize premiums
- Finance measurement infrastructure
- Educate communities
- Facilitate pilot projects and collaborations
- Fund research into insurable triggers

Enabling partnerships

"We need greater collaboration between governments, multilaterals, and private finance (including philanthropists and family offices) to create risk-sharing mechanisms like blended finance tools, guarantees and insurance that lower barriers to entry for private investors – and recognize that smaller investments with fewer strings that move quickly are, in the current moment, critical to deploy rather than waiting for the billions and trillions."

Karen Sack, Ocean Risk and Resilience Action Alliance (ORRAA)

Line them up

Problem: Insufficient pipeline of investable products.

Real-world example: The ORRAA Product Portfolio Pipeline.

ORRAA's Product Portfolio Pipeline incubates, innovates, and accelerates the development of finance and insurance products that invest in coastal and ocean natural capital. It makes grants of up to USD 0.5 mn to help turn early-stage ideas into structured, "investment-ready" projects that can be scaled into investment-ready propositions.

Monetization tools: Blue carbon; Parametric insurance; Payments for ecosystem services; Sustainable marine business

Funding solution: Grants; Impact bonds/loans; Blended finance.

Stakeholder connection: Connects communities with investors, insurers and municipal governments.

What you as a philanthropist can do to accelerate uptake of…

Eco-certifications

- Fund certification costs
- Connect communities with certification bodies
- Educate communities around the benefits of eco-certifications and the steps required to secure them

Philanthropy is not silver bullet. But it can accelerate the blue nature transition by help fostering innovation and collaboration, testing new solutions and business models, and sharing the hard lessons learnt.

Establishing a pipeline of scalable products

> "The perceived lack of an investable project pipeline is the single most-cited issue deterring potential private-sector investors from engaging. We have to build the pipeline from the bottom-up and from the top-down."

Karen Sack, ORRAA

The next wave

The unpriced, and therefore unvalued, nature of many ocean resources is a key factor driving their depletion. Changing this dynamic is essential to reversing the relentless march of nature loss and supporting the financialization needed to unlock critical funding needed to build a sustainable ocean economy.

As you reflect on these insights, think about the role your philanthropy plays in bridging the gap between innovation and investment in the blue nature economy. Of course you can look at its impact through the lens of individual projects and what they achieve. But you can also view your contribution more broadly and consider what it can do to bring the blue nature space to maturity as part of the wider capital spectrum.

You can play a unique and powerful role in accelerating change in the relatively immature blue nature space. By funding and facilitating projects that break new ground in pricing and monetizing blue natural resources – through tradeable credits, payments for ecosystem services, or eco-certifications and their associated premiums – philanthropists like you can spearhead the transformation needed.

Providing early-stage, patient, risk-tolerant capital is crucial. You're giving innovators the space to test new business models and prove their effectiveness. By connecting funding with on-the-ground solutions, de-risking investments with blended finance, achieving scale through aggregated portfolios, and demonstrating measurable benefits, your philanthropy helps attract private financiers and foster collaboration between diverse stakeholders.

There is no silver bullet – not all blue natural capital can or should be monetized and financialized. Building a sustainable ocean economy takes multiple levers, including government action, changes in corporate behaviors, and significant traditional capital investment.

Many philanthropic initiatives have a proven track record of impact and effecting scalable change. Such projects demonstrate that, with the right metrics, incentives, and values, a world where blue natural resources are protected and regenerated is both possible and profitable.

As you consider your own philanthropic strategies, we urge you to do so with a visionary mindset. How can your vision and actions contribute to this transformational wave, turning individual projects into a unified effort that brings real and lasting change.

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The UBS Optimus Foundation is a global network of separately organized and regulated, tax-exempt, charitable organizations, founded and managed by UBS, that make grants and other financial contributions to implementing partner organizations aligned with their values and objectives.

We connect passionate donors with bold, high-impact programs tackling the world's most pressing social and environmental challenges. While we don't run these programs ourselves, we empower trusted partners through grants and funding – amplifying efforts that align with our mission and values.

We're a global thought leader in philanthropy, focused on:

- Investing in ventures that drive measurable global impact
- Scaling solutions through strategic partnerships and policy collaboration
- Championing transparency and accountability in everything we do

As part of UBS Social Impact and Philanthropy, and central to the firm's social impact strategy, our nine foundation entities are fueled by the generosity of UBS, our clients, employees, and partners. Together, we aim to make every contribution go further and work smarter.

Want to know more? Check out the **UBS Optimus Foundation's website**

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