



First Asian Regional Dialogue on Seagrass and Dugong Conservation: From Gaps to Impactful Action

CONCEPT NOTE

Amari Watergate Hotel, Bangkok, Thailand,

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Context:

Seagrasses are among the world's most productive natural habitats, providing a plethora of highly valuable ecosystem services. They support biodiversity with food and habitat; improve water quality by filtering, cycling and storing nutrients and pollutants; protect coastal areas by attenuating wave energy; and support marine-based economic sectors, such as tourism and fisheries, including by providing critical nursery habitat to 20% of the world's biggest fisheries

Despite their importance, seagrasses continue to be undervalued, under-protected and overlooked in decision-making. They have been declining globally since the 1930s, and around 7% of this habitat is lost every year. Only 26% of globally recorded seagrass meadows currently fall within Marine Protected Areas, compared with 40% of coral reefs and 43% of mangroves (UNEP 2020, report).

Indo-Pacific seagrass areas are global hotspots for biodiversity, harbouring multiple species of ecological and cultural value, including globally important populations of dugongs and sea turtles.

Dugongs, as migratory marine mammals, face significant challenges in this region, primarily due to incidental bycatch, habitat loss, and degradation. Given their transboundary nature, the underlying causes of these threats vary across Range States, but key root issues include inadequate law enforcement, coastal development, and poverty. It is assumed that dugong populations are declining across the region, with seagrass habitat degradation being a major contributing factor. However, there are currently limited quantitative trend data available to confirm this.

While significant challenges persist in ensuring their protection, there is immense potential to strengthen conservation efforts through enhanced monitoring and management. To overcome these barriers, enhancing research, data collection, and monitoring practices is crucial. Ensuring compliance with recognized standards and fostering citizen science programs can support a more robust understanding of seagrass ecosystems. Strengthening political will through improved legal frameworks, integrating seagrass conservation into national and regional policies such as NDCs and NBSAPs, and fostering international collaboration are vital steps. Equitable governance and inclusive decision-making can further drive meaningful progress.

Coordinated management strategies, including integrated approaches, multi-stakeholder platforms, and engagement with behavior change and communication experts, can help align conservation efforts across sectors. These pathways, collectively, aim to address existing gaps and create a sustainable framework for seagrass protection and restoration.

The upcoming **First Asian Regional Dialogue on Seagrass and Dugong Conservation** seeks to bring together key actors to bridge existing gaps and amplify impactful action. This event will leverage the expertise, resources, and ongoing initiatives of partners including the **Memorandum of Understanding on the Conservation and Management of Dugongs and their Habitats throughout Their Range (Dugong MOU) under the Convention of Migratory Species (CMS)**, the **UNEP/GEF South China Sea Strategic Action Programme (SCS-SAP) Project**, and the **Coordinating Body on the Seas of East Asia (COBSEA)**.

This meeting will bring together key experts, policymakers, and conservation practitioners to discuss innovative approaches, identify gaps, and develop actionable strategies for the protection and restoration of seagrass ecosystems and associated dugong populations. Through targeted discussions and working group sessions, the aim is to enhance regional cooperation, scale up seagrass conservation initiatives, and mobilize the resources necessary to secure the long-term resilience of these critical ecosystems, and strengthen the momentum needed to safeguard seagrass ecosystems as critical components of sustainable development and climate resilience.

Objectives:

1. **Facilitate Knowledge Sharing:** Provide a platform for capacity building of the key stakeholders from Dugong MOU, SCS-SAP, and COBSEA. Experts will share the latest data, research, and successful strategies related to seagrass conservation, restoration, ecosystem services and associated dugong populations.
2. **Showcase Achievements:** Present recent successes and achievements from the Seagrass Ecosystem Service Project, and Strategic Action Programme for the South China Sea and Gulf of Thailand.
3. **Develop Practical Solutions:** Brainstorm and develop actionable strategies to address identified gaps, including the creation of concrete project ideas and initiatives that can be scaled at the regional level.
4. **Strengthen Collaboration:** Promote international cooperation between governments, NGOs, and local communities to foster integrated approaches for coastal conservation.

Expected Outcomes:

1. **Identification of Key Gaps and Capacity Needs:** A clear understanding of the primary challenges and gaps in current conservation efforts, including areas that require greater attention in terms of policy, data, capacity needs and resources.
2. **Development of Practical Strategies:** Development of actionable recommendations for integrating seagrass and Dugong in related policies.
3. **Collaborative Initiatives:** Formation of new partnerships and collaborations among governments, NGOs, researchers, and local communities.

Participants: Governments

- Dugong MOU Focal Points and Seagrass Ecosystem Services Partners
- SCS-SAP Project Seagrass Regional Working Group
- Steering Committee Members
- Technical Experts

Geographical Scope:

Seagrass Ecosystem Service Project countries, SCS-SAP Project countries, COBSEA participating countries, and Dugong MoU range states in Asia.

Collaborating Partners

Convention on Migratory Species (CMS) Dugong MoU

The CMS Memorandum of Understanding on the Conservation and Management of Dugongs (Dugong dugon) and their Habitats throughout their Range (Dugong MOU), based in Abu Dhabi, is mandated to research, protect, conserve, and manage dugongs and seagrass ecosystems. Moreover, the Seagrass Resolution ([CMS Resolution 14.8](#)) was adopted by parties at CMS COP14 in February 2024, emphasizing the urgent need for coordinated global action to halt seagrass habitat loss, strengthen conservation efforts, and secure long-term ecological resilience.

Through initiatives like the [2030 Seagrass Breakthrough](#) and the [Seagrass Ecosystem Services \(SES\) Project](#), CMS has successfully aligned global priorities to protect seagrass habitats, fostering collaboration among governments, technical partners, and local communities.

Seagrass Ecosystem Service Project (IKI SES):

The overall goal of the Seagrass Ecosystem service project is to improve conservation of seagrass meadows and the biodiversity they support in India, Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines, Thailand, and Timor-Leste.

The Seagrass Ecosystem Service Project, funded by the International Climate Initiative (IKI), focuses on conserving and restoring seagrass habitats, which play a crucial role in climate change mitigation, biodiversity protection, and supporting coastal livelihoods. The project emphasizes community engagement, policy advocacy, and scientific research to promote sustainable management practices. It aims to build local capacity, standardize data collection methods, and enhance knowledge sharing among stakeholders. By integrating conservation with sustainable development goals, the project seeks to secure seagrass ecosystems' long-term health while reducing vulnerability in coastal communities across the Indo-Pacific region.

2030 Seagrass Breakthrough:

The CMS Office – Abu Dhabi and the UN High-Level Climate Change Champions are collaborating to establish the initiative to support the shaping and operationalization of the 2030 Seagrass Breakthrough. Building on the Ocean Breakthroughs, the 2030 Seagrass Breakthrough provides a framework for State and non-State actors to work together, safeguarding over 16 million hectares of global seagrass. Scientific evidence highlights the urgency of mobilizing at least USD 12 billion by 2030 to halt seagrass loss, ensure effective protection, and accelerate restoration.

1. Promoting long-term finance
2. Halting seagrass loss
3. Doubling the area under effective protection x2
4. Accelerating seagrass restoration

South China Sea Strategic Action Programme (SCS-SAP)

The United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) / Global Environment Facility (GEF) SCS-SAP Project, executed by the UN Office for Project Services, aims to assist countries in meeting the targets of the coastal and marine environment components of the approved SAP for the South China Sea through implementation of the National Action Plans in support of the SAP, and strengthening the regional coordination for the South China Sea and Gulf of Thailand SAP implementation. The SCS SAP targets the conservation, management, and sustainable use of 25,900 ha of seagrass in the region, and integrates seagrass conservation into broader environmental strategies, including through the establishment of a dedicated seagrass regional working group. The SCS-SAP Project is implemented in Cambodia, China, Indonesia, Philippines, Thailand, and Viet Nam.

Coordinating Body on the Seas of East Asia (COBSEA)

COBSEA is a regional intergovernmental mechanism bringing together nine countries (Cambodia, People's Republic of China, Indonesia, Republic of Korea, Malaysia, the Philippines, Thailand, Singapore and Viet Nam) in the sustainable development and protection of the marine environment and coastal areas of the East Asian Seas. Guided by the COBSEA Strategic Directions 2023-2027, efforts are focused across three thematic areas: 1) marine pollution prevention, reduction, and control, 2) marine and coastal biodiversity, ecosystem conservation and management, and 3) climate action. COBSEA's efforts are further guided by the Marine and Coastal Ecosystems (MCE) Framework which integrates regional efforts on biodiversity and ecosystems across 1) marine and coastal spatial planning, 2) marine protected areas, and 3) marine and coastal habitat conservation and restoration, which includes seagrass. The MCE Framework established the COBSEA Working Group on Marine and Coastal Ecosystems which provides direction and advice on activities and priorities.

COBSEA is one of the 18 Regional Seas Programmes and is among the 7 hosted by UNEP.

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