

# UN warns of a 'deepening crisis' in oceans as warming, overfishing, and pollution grow

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by Wyatt Fischer June 14, 2026

Multiple threats are converging in the oceans; a deepening crisis, driven by climate-related damage, pollution, overfishing, and ongoing biodiversity loss, could become a global issue.

## What happened?

In the latest [World Ocean Assessment](#), 600 scientists from 86 nations conclude that marine ecosystems essential to human survival are facing intensifying strain.

The assessment identifies sea-level rise, more acidic waters, coral reef loss, and dwindling fish populations as severe problems.

Up to 45% of global economic activity occurs in coastal areas, around 3 billion people live within 62 miles of the ocean, and fish supply about one-fifth of the animal protein humans consume.

The report says overfishing is worsening, with roughly 38% of the world's fish stocks being taken at unsustainable levels in 2021, up from 35% two years earlier.

## Why does it matter?

Ocean warming is a major contributor to rising seas, accounting for an estimated 30% to 50% of the increase. From 2013 to 2023, global sea levels rose by 4.3 millimeters per year, about twice the rate recorded from 1993 to 2002.

A striking share of the ocean's heat gain has happened recently; about one-sixth of the total gain over the past 70 years occurred in the 2018 to 2023 period alone.

Warming seas can fuel more destructive [hurricanes](#) and tropical cyclones while pushing marine species into cooler waters, disrupting local fisheries and the communities that depend on them.

The report also warned that pollutants are building up in marine organisms and moving up the food chain, eventually reaching animals eaten by humans.

## What are people saying?

Lead author Ian Butler, a marine ecologist with the Australian government, said, "The coming decade is decisive: without rapid, coordinated global action, ocean health will continue to

decline, threatening climate stability, biodiversity resilience, food security, livelihoods and the well-being of billions," Butler said.

The report itself states, "Rising heat, contamination and pollution, such as plastic waste, agricultural run-off, sewage and chemicals, are major contributors to the decline in ocean health."

"I believe with urgent, coordinated global action we still can restore its health to secure a healthy, biodiverse ocean which would benefit all life on Earth," he said.

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