



International Waters

A close-up photograph of a body of water, likely a pond or lake. In the foreground, a dark, reflective surface of water is visible, with a submerged object (possibly a piece of wood or a branch) partially visible on the right. In the background, several tall, green reeds or grasses stand in the water, their reflections visible on the surface. The lighting is bright, suggesting a sunny day.

MAIN ISSUE

The health of shared freshwater and marine ecosystems underpins social and economic aspirations at local, national, and regional levels, including achieving many UN Sustainable Development Goals. Good governance of these ecosystems is the foundation for building long-term resilience that benefits a healthy planet and healthy people.

However, aquatic ecosystems face unprecedented threats. Ocean ecosystems are facing multiple pressures, ranging from climate change and acidification to pollution, habitat loss and excessive fishing. Freshwater ecosystems face multiple stresses. These range from alteration to the hydrological cycle due to climate change to over-abstraction and pollution of surface and groundwater. These stresses threaten water security for people and

nature and contribute to an alarming loss of freshwater biodiversity.

More than 40% of the world's population lives in shared basins representing more than half of Earth's surface area, and equally 40% of the population lives within 100 km of the coast, including most major cities. Cooperation is therefore essential to secure water, food, energy, and ecosystems services in the long run and to avoid tension and conflicts with climate change posing additional pressures. The COVID-19 pandemic made it clear that water is an essential resource that will enhance our ability to respond, recover, and rebuild, while also providing an opportunity to rethink and reprioritize development outcomes.



WHAT WE DO

The GEF's International Waters (IW) Focal Area has a unique mandate—to support transboundary cooperation in shared marine and freshwater ecosystems. It is the world's largest funding mechanism for multi-country collaboration on freshwater and the ocean, with GEF recipient countries and non-recipient countries working together on this critical issue.

With GEF IW Focal Area support, countries have successfully negotiated regional cooperation frameworks, treaties, and protocols, ranging from cooperation on shared surface and groundwater to agreements on marine resources. These have reduced threats and fostered sustainable use of resources. This is often achieved by catalyzing regional participatory and collaborative processes

to identify major ecological, economic, and social challenges and opportunities. Building on these processes, action plans set common priorities for regional and nationally coherent policy reforms and key investments. GEF IW investments facilitate integrated, cross-sectoral approaches that engage the public and private sector, civil society, nongovernmental organizations, and bilateral and multilateral institutions. They are designed to work at multiple scales—from community to cabinet—and across transboundary watersheds, from source to sea. This integrated approach demonstrates the transformative social and economic impact that cooperation and sustainable management of transboundary fresh and marine water resources can have on national economies.

GEF-8 International Waters Focal Area Strategy

The GEF-8 IW strategy has three objectives that collectively aim to improve cooperative management in 40 new and existing shared water ecosystems contributing to water security, decreased pollution and more sustainable uses of water and related natural resources; improve management of at least 100 million ha of newly created and existing marine protected areas; improve practices to benefit biodiversity in a further 70 million ha of marine habitats; and move at least 2.1 million metric tons of global overexploited marine fisheries to more sustainable levels.

GEF International Waters Focal Area funds also complement key GEF-8 Integrated Programs to transform Food Systems which collectively account for 70 % of global water withdrawals, to decrease land-based sources of pollution via the Clean and Healthy Oceans and the Circular Solutions to Plastic Pollution, and to Elimination of Hazardous Chemicals from Supply Chains Integrated Programs as well as protecting Critical Forest Biomes.

GEF-8 IW Core Indicators

40

new and existing
shared water ecosystems

100

improve management of at least
million ha
of newly created
and existing marine protected areas

70

improve practices to benefit
biodiversity in a further
million ha
of marine habitats

2.1

move at least
million metric tons
of global overexploited marine fisheries
to more sustainable levels.



Objective 1: Accelerate joint action to support sustainable blue economic development

This objective will assist countries in identifying sustainable public and private investments to accelerate joint action in support of blue economies through two areas of strategic transboundary action: sustaining healthy blue ecosystems, and advancing sustainable fisheries management.

To sustain healthy blue ecosystems, GEF support will focus on addressing multiple anthropogenic pressures, including climate change impacts, nutrient run-off, noise pollution, plastic pollution, unsustainable fisheries, habitat degradation, and destruction in the Large Marine Ecosystems. Investment may include developing regional analyses and plans; developing and updating marine spatial plans and sustainable blue economy plans to inform national policy decisions and mainstreaming spatial planning tools in regional entities; and establishing and supporting marine protected areas of national and international importance and transboundary connection, or other area-based conservation measures. It may also include demonstrations targeting restoration

of degraded key marine and coastal habitats through deployment of nature-based solutions and payment for ecosystem services, as well as efforts to stimulate private sector engagement through relevant industry sectoral roundtables and industry groups.

To advance sustainable fisheries management, GEF support will target, inter alia, policy and regulatory reforms to end illegal, unreported, and unregulated (IUU) fishing practices and overfishing; to limit by-catch; and to sustainably manage marine capture fisheries, taking human rights and other aspects into consideration. It may also help countries advance adoption and implementation of the Port State Measures Agreement (PSMA). Additional support could focus on eliminating harmful incentive structures, implementing market mechanisms to support sustainable fisheries' value chains, promoting standard setting for sustainable aquaculture, and de-risking innovation. This objective also aims to improve availability of reliable data to inform policy and decision making, capacity building, and piloting of innovation and best available technologies, as well as promoting development of sustainability indicators and monitoring systems.



Objective 2: Advance management in the Areas Beyond National Jurisdiction (ABNJ)

The Areas Beyond National Jurisdiction (ABNJ) cover 64% of the ocean or 40% of the world's surface. They face significant threats, such as overfishing of some iconic pelagic migratory species, ocean energy facilities, bottom trawling on seamounts, and pollution. This objective aims to address these threats through multiple entry points including, increasing local, national, regional, and global management capacity and access to data and knowledge. For example, supporting use of new tools for monitoring, control, and surveillance of fishing activity and combating IUU fishing. This will be achieved in close cooperation with existing Regional Seas and International Maritime Organization agreements, Regional Fisheries Management Organization processes, and implementation of the PSMA, as well as through advancing global buy-in of industry standards and food safety protocols of ocean value chains. At the request of the negotiating parties and once negotiations have concluded, this objective may also support national ratification and implementation of an international legally binding instrument under the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea on the conservation and sustainable use of marine biological diversity of ABNJ.



Objective 3: Enhance water security in shared freshwater ecosystems

Shared freshwater resources represent a special case for cooperation with large potential economic, political, and development spillover and global impacts. Transboundary river basins cover about 50% of Earth's surface and are underpinning the achievement of most SDGs. GEF IW investments are always country-owned and country-driven. They aim to strengthen cooperation to improve governance of transboundary water systems, enhance regional and national policy coherence across sectors, manage freshwater connectivity across and within borders, and aid countries to jointly identify solutions to address nexus trade-offs through cooperation and sharing of benefits and costs. A participatory process to identify key issues that affect national and regional water-related stresses is vital for transboundary priority setting and provides the basis for the development of agreed SAPs. Ensuring transboundary environmental and water security starts by strengthening management capacity at local and national levels, including capacities to assess and monitor surface and groundwater availability, use, and pollution as a base to inform coherent national policy and strategy formulation and regulatory efforts.

GEF investments under this objective aim to, inter alia, improve policy formulation processes, Integrated Water Resources Management implementation and conjunctive management of surface and groundwater resources, as well as address loss of river and ecosystems connectivity and freshwater biodiversity, support sustainable management of freshwater fisheries, and build capacity to gather and synthesize scientific, local, and people science to inform decision-making processes. This objective also aims to apply nature-based and innovative solutions to improve water quality and freshwater ecosystems health and implementing a source-to-sea approach. This includes supporting sustainable wetlands management; curbing severe impacts of floods, droughts, climate change impacts, and river/lake shoreline deterioration; and furthering aquifer recharge. GEF support also aims to engage with private sector actors to address supply chain approaches for increased water efficiency and reduction of ecosystems pressures, transparency in reporting, and de-risking innovation through incremental finance and piloting innovative technologies.

Integrated Programs and Crosscutting

Freshwater and marine water is the connective tissue across sectors and countries and the health of people and the planet. Participatory processes to build trust and identify priorities, as well as agreed investments, therefore need to include all relevant stakeholders. This includes providing opportunities for indigenous groups, women, and youth, and integration and adaptation of local knowledge to the local context. Shared freshwater and marine ecosystems weave through all the GEF Focal Areas, as well as the 11 Integrated Programs within the GEF-8 Programming Directions including, inter alia, the Food

Systems Integrated Program; Ecosystem Restoration Integrated Program; Sustainable Cities Integrated Program; Amazon, Congo, and Critical Forest Biomes Integrated Program; Circular Solutions to Plastic Pollution Integrated Program; Blue and Green Islands Integrated Program; and the Clean and Healthy Ocean Integrated Program. Additionally, engagement of both public and private sectors will also be essential toward delivering sustainable, tangible results in transboundary marine and freshwater ecosystems. This could include stimulating private sector engagement along the different supply chains to reduce environmental impacts in targeted ecosystems.

The Global Environment Facility (GEF) is a family of funds dedicated to confronting biodiversity loss, climate change, pollution, and strains on land and ocean health. Its grants, blended financing, and policy support helps developing countries address their biggest environmental priorities and adhere to international environmental conventions. Over the past three decades, the GEF has provided more than \$22 billion and mobilized \$120 billion in co-financing for more than 5,000 national and regional projects.