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COMMENTARY

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How to Engage With, and Have Impact on, Marine Governance: A Practical Guide for Early-Career Researchers

Denis B. Karcher [1], Christopher Cvitanovic [2,3], Melanie C. Austen [4], Aislinn F. Dunne [5], Louisa Evans [6], Rebecca Gruby [7,8], Nicole Malinconico [9,10], Shannon McLaughlin [11], E. J. Milner-Gulland [12], and Nathalie A. Steins [13]

[1] Anthropocene Laboratory, Royal Swedish Academy of Sciences, Sweden
[2] Centre for Marine Science and Innovation, University of New South Wales, Australia
[3] Business School, University of New South Wales, Australia
[4] School of Biological and Marine Sciences, University of Plymouth, UK
[5] General Organization for Conservation of Coral Reefs and Turtles in the Red Sea (SHAMS), Saudi Arabia
[6] Department of Geography, University of Exeter, UK
[7] Department of Environmental Science and Policy, University of Miami, USA
[8] Robert K. Johnson Center for Marine Conservation, University of Miami, USA
[9] Global Water Institute, University of New South Wales, Australia
[10] Centre for Nature Positive Solutions, Royal Melbourne Institute of Technology, Australia
[11] Environmental Policy Group, Wageningen University & Research, The Netherlands
[12] Department of Biology, University of Oxford, UK
[13] Wageningen Marine Research, Wageningen University & Research, The Netherlands

Correspondence: Denis Karcher (denis.karcher@kva.se)

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Abstract

Early-career researchers (ECRs) are at the forefront of producing the knowledge and solutions needed to address contemporary ocean challenges. Their work is often highly inter- and transdisciplinary, generating insights that are critical for informed decision-making, and effective and equitable marine governance. Yet, despite this potential for impact, many ECRs lack access to the tools, training, and institutional support necessary to engage meaningfully with governance processes. Such structural complexities are further compounded by practical constraints that ECRs experience such as short project timelines and limited networks, making engagement with governance particularly intimidating and/or difficult for ECRs. This commentary seeks to empower ECRs against this background by addressing eight frequently asked

questions about how ECRs in marine sciences can enhance their impact on marine governance. By equipping emerging researchers with actionable guidance drawn from experience, we hope to strengthen the science–policy interface and empower the next generation of researchers to contribute to more informed and legitimate marine governance.

Keywords

early-career researchers; research impact; science–policy interface; transdisciplinary research

1. Introduction

Many researchers aspire for their work to have real-world application and impact. The ambition for impact is particularly strong among early-career researchers (ECRs; Box 1; Filyushkina et al., 2022; Wróblewska et al., 2024). ECRs are often at the forefront of inter- and transdisciplinary marine research. This can benefit ECRs, helping them build professional networks, develop communication and collaboration skills, and gain experience with science–policy–society interfaces, which can prepare them for diverse career paths (Evans & Cvitanovic, 2018). In turn, their methodological openness, diverse training backgrounds, and willingness to work across disciplinary and institutional boundaries also position them to contribute fresh perspectives and innovative approaches to enhance effective marine governance (Strand et al., 2022). Supporting ECRs to achieve impact is, therefore, not only beneficial for their professional development, but also for the future of marine science and decision-making.

Despite this potential, ECRs face distinct challenges when seeking to engage with marine governance. Short project timelines, limited resources, smaller networks, and lower perceived credibility can make meaningful engagement difficult (Rölfer et al., 2022; Schrot et al., 2020). These factors often coincide with precarious working conditions and academic expectations that prioritise publications over engagement, creating tensions between producing applied outputs and meeting career progression criteria (Wróblewska et al., 2024). A lack of advisory support/guidance can further discourage ECRs from engaging with governance processes, particularly when advisors themselves have limited experience or capacity to mentor science–policy engagement. Marine governance itself can add further complexity, with multi-level institutions, complex resource-use issues, and their often transboundary nature, creating additional barriers to know how/where to engage. These challenges highlight the need for clearer, more accessible guidance to support ECRs. In our experience, there are specific questions that are often asked by ECRs hoping to have impact on marine governance, for which actionable entry-level answers are not readily available.

This commentary seeks to address this by offering an accessible starting point for ECRs who wish to engage with marine governance. At the same time, it is important to acknowledge that not all research needs to seek impact and that impact is not always feasible or appropriate. This commentary, therefore, does not aim to add pressure on ECRs to demonstrate impact. Rather, it seeks to offer practical, entry-level guidance for those who *choose* to engage with marine governance and wish to make their research more relevant to decision-making. Because impact is highly context-specific, we acknowledge that this guidance is not exhaustive nor definitive, but rather intended as a starting point that can be adapted to individual circumstances.

Box 1. How key terms are used in this commentary.

- ECRs: Includes students undertaking research projects, PhD candidates, postdoctoral fellows, and new faculty as well as early-career non-university-based researchers.
- Research impact: "Demonstrable and/or perceptible benefits…that are causally linked (necessarily or sufficiently) to research" (Reed et al., 2021, p. 3).
- Engaging with: Entails two-way exchange of knowledge, for example via co-production and boundary-spanning as participatory approaches to generate actionable knowledge (Karcher et al., 2024; Mach et al., 2020).
- Marine governance: Includes marine management and regulation, policy development, law making, co-management, and politics.

2. Practical Recommendations

We identified frequently asked questions (FAQs) drawn from running summer schools on marine science-policy knowledge exchange, conversations at conferences, and ECRs interested in this space (asking them for common questions, to review, supplement, and provide experiences; now co-authors of this commentary). We then compiled actionable guidance (Figure 1) based on our collective experiences across diverse marine governance contexts (in Australia, Europe, the Middle East, North and South America, the South Pacific, Southeast Asia, and the Western Indian Ocean). To supplement our experiences, we also provide a list of further recommended readings in the Supplementary Material. Finally, we note that the responses to the FAQs may overlap, yet we present them individually for clarity.

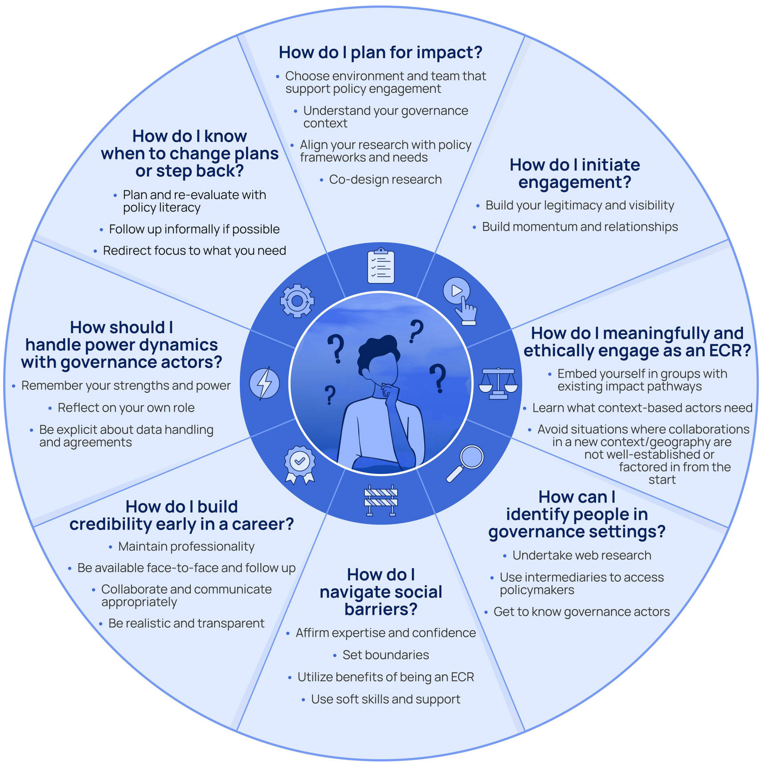

Figure 1. Summary of advice for the eight FAQs on how to engage with, and have impact on, marine governance.

2.1. FAQ1: How Do I Plan for Impact?

Planning for impact begins long before data collection. ECRs often assume impact emerges at the end of a project, but in practice it depends on whether the research is positioned within the right environment, connected to the right people, and aligned with the needs of decision-makers. The choices made at the outset of a project shape the opportunities you will have to engage with, and contribute to, governance. Thinking about impact early helps ensure your work is relevant, timely, and visible to those who can use it (Table 1).

Table 1. Key considerations, rationales, and actions for FAQ1 (planning ahead for impact).

Key consideration	Why it matters	Actions
Choose an environment & team that supports policy engagement	The culture and priorities of your institute/university (hereafter referred to as "research organisation") shape what impact activities are normal, supported, and rewarded. Being in a policy-facing environment with established policy links increases your exposure to real-world problems and policy networks.	Review research organisations' websites to gauge focus on impact versus blue-sky research. Look for research organisations that have advisory roles or collaborations with agencies. Review CVs of potential supervisors for advisory roles, policy outputs, or publications co-authored with governance actors. Ask existing students and potential advisors: "How does your group engage with policy actors?"
Understand the governance context within which your topic fits	Engagement is only effective if you know who you need to impact and how.	Use web searches and chat with colleagues to understand what scale your topic could have an impact at and what institutions are responsible for managing the marine system of interest. Participate in policy-relevant conferences, town-hall meetings, Living Labs, LinkedIn discussions, and think about how they relate to your work. Reach out to experienced researchers with complementary focus to explore when your topic might become interesting to decision-makers (policy horizon scanning).
Align your research proposal with policy frameworks and existing needs	Policy documents often identify knowledge gaps and priorities. Aligning with these increases the relevance of your work.	Read management plans (e.g., MPA management plans), strategies, or regulatory frameworks aligned to your study area. Identify research needs of governmental or management agencies when shaping your research questions (through their websites or staff). Draft a research impact plan (https://www.fasttrackimpact.com/impactculture-editable-impact-templates) identifying what you are planning to achieve, who might use it, and how you could engage with them. Identify which actors might be interested in your work, which actors have influence, who is affected, and who can champion your work (actor-mapping methods; Reed et al., 2025).

Table 1. (Cont.) Key considerations, rationales, and actions for FAQ1 (planning ahead for impact).

Key consideration	Why it matters	Actions
Co-design research	Buy-in from relevant actors is critical from the beginning and ensures that you ask the right questions.	Engage with governance actors as you write your proposal (participatory co-design). Identify what format outputs (briefs, presentations, reports) different actors prefer. Remain flexible to accommodate changing policy priorities/needs.

Note: MPA = Marine protected area.

2.2. FAQ2: How Do I Initiate Engagement With Potential Research Users?

Engagement with governance is usually most productive when approached as a process of building relationships, credibility, understanding local contexts, and contributing in focused, realistic ways. We believe that starting with small, well-targeted actions allows ECRs to demonstrate value, develop trust, and create the foundations for longer-term momentum as their careers progress. Engagement benefits from strategy and intention: Reflect on how relevant actors can get to know you and adapt your plans as relationships and understanding evolve (Table 2).

Table 2. Key considerations, rationales, and actions for FAQ2 (initiating engagement).

Key consideration	Why it matters	Actions
Build your legitimacy and visibility	An easy-to-find (online) presence signals accessibility and allows you to leverage the trust of your research organisation.	Keep your institutional webpage updated with your photo, role, expertise, and current project(s). Use LinkedIn or other social media to post regularly about your research, tag and follow relevant governance actors. Go to community and open-door events with some background knowledge and have informal conversations.
Start small to build momentum and actively build relationships	Well-targeted contributions demonstrate value and create openings for deeper engagement without overcommitting.	Ask intended beneficiaries of your research directly if there is something you could do to be helpful (e.g., contributing to workshops or document reviews). Offer to give a “lunchtime seminar” at relevant government agencies (e.g., through colleagues’ contacts, or the agency’s website). Produce a short evidence summary (e.g., policy brief) about your research plans or early findings to send to relevant actors. Contribute to existing consultation processes if available (on government agency websites, or via colleagues).

2.3. FAQ3: How Do I Meaningfully and Ethically Engage as an ECR?

ECRs often find it difficult to meaningfully engage with governance actors, particularly when working on short-term contracts or moving between countries and institutional contexts. These conditions can limit relationship-building and make it harder to establish legitimacy and operate ethically, particularly if you are working in new settings. Avoid projects that "parachute" you into situations where collaborations in a different country/region are not already well-established, or where making those collaborations right from the start is not factored into the project (Table 3; de Vos & Schwartz, 2022).

Table 3. Key considerations, rationales, and actions for FAQ3 (meaningful and ethical engagement).

Key consideration	Why it matters	Actions
Embed yourself in groups with existing impact pathways	Short-term contracts rarely allow time to build meaningful relationships from scratch. Joining teams with established networks gives you access to policy actors, ongoing initiatives, and trusted collaborators.	Question employers about ethical engagement to increase your chance of finding a job with meaningful impact. Ask potential collaborators/supervisors whether the project already has governance/community links. If not, consider reframing your project to ensure that it relates to a policy issue with more established collaborations. Engage context-based partners in designing the project or ask project leaders how context-based partners were involved. Avoid roles where meaningful collaboration is impossible—change plans to allow time for developing it or readjust to existing collaborations. Where possible and appropriate, seek to join ongoing working groups, advisory panels, or meetings with stakeholders, Rightsholders, or Indigenous Peoples (Reed et al., 2024), even in an observatory role.
Learn and revisit what actors actually need	Engagement is meaningful only when embedded in its appropriate context. Understanding needs helps to prevent misalignment and extractive or "parachute" practices.	Attend community events, informal gatherings, or shared meals to understand context. Observe how role models communicate and interact. Develop awareness for the social, cultural, and religious context you are entering—what behaviours might be inappropriate or misunderstood. Keep your research focus open enough to serve local research needs you might only learn through engagement; stick to what is relevant to societal partners, be mindful of their time, and constraints. Follow best practices for participatory research and CARE principles (https://www.gida-global.org/careprinciples) when working with Rightsholders or Indigenous Peoples. Practise reflexivity and empathy for difficult policy decisions/procedures.
Build and maintain relationships ethically and transparently	Short-term or international work can unintentionally create extractive dynamics. Ethical engagement requires clarity, reciprocity, and respect for local expertise.	Agree early on roles, responsibilities, and realistic expectations. Follow privacy regulations, Free, Prior and Informed Consent (FPIC) and FAIR (https://www.go-fair.org/fair-principles) where appropriate. Develop timelines that allow genuine engagement (time for consultation, feedback, collaboration). Avoid last-minute invitations and one-off interactions. Ensure follow-up; share results with actors who have helped you (e.g., interviewees, advisors, policy officers). Offer involvement (e.g., shared outputs) aligned with context/cultural norms and expectations.

2.4. FAQ4: How Can I Identify the Right People in Governance Settings?

Knowing who to engage is critical for effective science–policy work, but often it is difficult to identify who is dealing with certain topics in the governance of a specific marine space, resource, or issue (e.g., which individuals to contact within large government bodies). Mapping formal and informal governance actors relevant to your topic is a crucial first step (Table 4).

Table 4. Key considerations, rationales, and actions for FAQ4 (identifying appropriate contacts).

Key consideration	Why it matters	Actions
Undertake web research	Often, there is more information on the web than we think.	Review websites and reports; find the unit of the organisation that seems most relevant to you; often there is a theme leader's name within an organisation you can contact (e.g., via LinkedIn) and invite for a coffee and chat. Contact government organisations' science sections (often called Evidence/Research & Development team) or their communications/partnerships team. Find and join relevant ECR networks and training opportunities.
Use intermediaries when direct access to policymakers is difficult	There are actors who can be bridges to governance actors.	Ask advisors/colleagues for introductions to contacts that could be interested in your research. Contact your research organisation's knowledge exchange, communication, or policy engagement officers. Contact applied research institutes, science academies, or science–policy expert groups. Join networks or mailing lists where policy discussions occur.
Get to know governance actors through academic colleagues	Personal connections are invaluable for impact, and meeting policy actors often happens through shared connections.	Approach colleagues who are working with policymakers and ask for their advice (e.g., "Do you know anyone who works at the Department of X?") and make a first contact through a shared connection. Target conferences, workshops, or meetings where non-academic stakeholders, Rightsholders, or Indigenous Peoples convene. Apply for policy internships/fellowships or secondments with science academies or government organisations to gain connections and de-mystify processes. Network with non-academic actors both formally (e.g., ask questions after their talk) and informally (casual chat over coffee).

2.5. FAQ5: How Do I Navigate Social Barriers?

Discrimination and prejudice related to identity and structural inequalities are a major barrier to ECRs. Not being taken seriously because of career stage (perceived juniority) intersects with and exacerbates other societal biases and barriers, for example related to gender, race and ethnicity, age, or disabilities. If you experience this, remember this is not a reflection of your ability. While the limited space and focus of this commentary will not do justice to the complexity and intersectionality of discrimination, we here share some broad advice for navigating social barriers related to career stage when engaging with governance (Table 5).

Table 5. Key considerations, rationales, and actions for FAQ5 (navigating bias and prejudice).

Key consideration	Why it matters	Actions
Display expertise and self-confidence	Believing and affirming your expertise helps to deflate biases.	Be well prepared. Do not downplay your expertise; do not deflect praise, accept work-related compliments. Contribute proactively to meetings (joining the discussion rather than waiting to be asked what you think). Speak clearly, make eye contact, and avoid starting sentences with apologies.
Utilise the benefits of being an ECR	People are more willing to explain things if you are "new" and expect less background knowledge or direct returns.	Ask questions to improve your understanding of policy contexts. Leverage soft skills such as empathy, active listening, and curiosity to build trust and dialogue. Be clear and open about your level of knowledge, position, goals, and expectations.
Find support	Supporters can help you have a voice in high-level meetings when you know there are biases.	Ask if colleagues know a participant who you could contact beforehand and who could give you the word in a meeting if otherwise overlooked. Network with others whose contributions may also be overlooked. If you face stress, discomfort, or harassment, reach out for institutional assistance or psychological support. Asking for help is a sign of strength, not weakness.
Set boundaries	When faced with biases, it is important to protect your space in a meeting (without losing face or offending others).	Respond with calm assertiveness (e.g., "Let me just finish this point please"). Be polite but firm about what is not appropriate.

2.6. FAQ6: How Do I Build Credibility Early in a Career?

Being recognised and trusted by governance actors is challenging, particularly for ECRs. Governance actors tend to look at the big picture but want expertise that is sufficiently in-depth to be trustworthy. It is ok to be new and figure things out. Critical ingredients to science-policy credibility are trust, rigour, and the perceived impartiality of your research (Cvitanovic et al., 2021; Table 6).

Table 6. Key considerations, rationales, and actions for FAQ6 (building credibility).

Key consideration	Why it matters	Actions
Maintain professionality and accessibility	A professional online presence signals credibility, seriousness, and accountability.	Maintain professional profiles on LinkedIn and your research organisation's websites with a photo, research interests, and recent outputs. Behave respectfully and with integrity. Ensure your previous work is easy to find (e.g., Google Scholar). Ask advisors/mentors for networking opportunities and be available for face-to-face meetings with governance actors.

Table 6. (Cont.) Key considerations, rationales, and actions for FAQ6 (building credibility).

Key consideration	Why it matters	Actions
Collaborate	Collaborations with established researchers or research organisations can enhance credibility.	Invite researchers whose impact you admire to collaborate or review your articles. Mention people/institutions you have worked with that the other person might know—to create context, not to boast. When possible, accept opportunities to collaborate on other research projects.
Be realistic and communicate appropriately	Overpromising and underdelivering is harmful to your credibility, while transparently managing and communicating your capacity further builds it.	Be realistic about what information you can deliver and when. Do not overcommit; talk to advisors about what is feasible. Be transparent when mistakes happen.
Follow up with information	Humility combined with curiosity builds more credibility than overconfidence.	Acknowledge when you do not know something—your transparency is a strength. Re-engage with correct information afterwards, which demonstrates integrity and refreshes a connection. Being grateful and providing feedback reinforces relationships and signals professionalism.

2.7. FAQ7: How Should I Handle Power Dynamics With Governance Actors?

Professionalism and objectivity are critical to ensuring your research is impactful (Table 7). Even then, good evidence does not always translate into good policy decisions. Evidence from science is just one of many components that governance actors must consider and it helps to show awareness of that as you engage. Sometimes societal or governance actors might engage with you just to seek confirmation of their position/opinion, and it is important to reflect on your role, responsibility, and power.

Table 7. Key considerations, rationales, and actions for FAQ7 (handling power dynamics and agendas).

Key consideration	Why it matters	Actions
Feel empowered	Despite the barriers and biases often faced, you do hold some power as ECRs engaging with governance.	Remind yourself that you hold academic knowledge and contacts you can leverage. Perceive impact in diverse forms at multiple stages of the policy-cycle (rather than aiming to *solve* a big political problem). When sharing scientific information, use methodologically robust evidence.
Reflect on your own role	There can be consequences of being involved in advocacy as a scientist (on credibility and legitimacy of your science, yourself, and your field).	Be aware of your own role as an (often impartial) scientist in a specific context and how your language and actions may affect your engagement. Reflect on your positionality and assumptions and probe underlying agendas/assumptions of your team. Ask peers if you are not sure if your actions may entail a conflict of interest. Seek institutional support if you experience adverse responses/attention from governance actors or the public.

Table 7. (Cont.) Key considerations, rationales, and actions for FAQ7 (handling power dynamics and agendas).

Key consideration	Why it matters	Actions
Data handling and agreements	Governance engagement can cause limitations regarding how you are expected/allowed to share findings. It is important to anticipate potential conflicts and consider formal agreements up front.	Follow privacy regulations, where appropriate. If contracted to work with non-academic actors, have your research organisation's legal department review the collaboration agreement. Detail how you are expected to share data, whether you are required to have outputs checked before release, whether the non-academic actor can veto outputs or has any IP. In many places, your research organisation's research ethics department must give formal permission for any research with human dimensions. Communicate findings constructively even if critical—avoid direct confrontation or overly emotive language.

Note: IP = Intellectual property.

2.8. FAQ8: How Do I Know When to Change Plans or Step Back?

Decision-makers' needs can change rapidly, usually at the behest of politics, crises, or public pressures. Often, the actions resulting from your research, even if co-developed, are not feasible at that time for political, economic, or social reasons, but that does not mean your research cannot have impact. It may be taken up later, or in ways that you did not anticipate. If the engagement is not working or decision-makers are not responding, it may be time to reassess your approach (Table 8). Changes in governance often take a long time to play out. Rushing/pushing will not necessarily help your case, but gentle persistence can.

Table 8. Key considerations, rationales, and actions for FAQ8 (when to change plans).

Key consideration	Why it matters	Actions
Plan wisely and re-evaluate regularly	Policy-literate planning (including re-evaluation) helps to detect dysfunction and potentially take corrective action.	Think ahead within your project team about what barriers for impact might arise and how to deal with them. Have regular meetings/updates with your team and potential end-users about (intermediate) results. Confirm whether your research question(s) is/are still answering a question the governance actor actually has.
Follow up	Do not make assumptions about why people are not responding—better find out what is going on.	Keep following up with the established type of communication—a lack of response may simply mean they are busy. Ask whether the research topic is no longer needed or should be adjusted to make it more relevant. In person and informal is always better—will you or a (more senior) colleague be at a workshop with them soon and can chat with them in the coffee-break? Be direct but polite in correspondence (e.g., "It would be helpful if you could quickly let me know that this research is no longer likely to be useful to you, so that I stop hassling you but also can make new plans").

Table 8. (Cont.) Key considerations, rationales, and actions for FAQ8 (when to change plans).

Key consideration	Why it matters	Actions
Redirect focus	Priorities can change. There is no point chasing a governance entity when their window of opportunity has passed and you have a deadline.	Be transparent about the challenges and necessary changes. Recognise and value that you will have learnt much from this experience, even if shifting focus. Continue cultivating the networks you have created, they are useful throughout your career, or to achieve impact from your research at a later time.

3. Conclusion

In this commentary, we have sought to provide entry-level guidance for ECRs who aim to have an impact on marine governance. Further, we point to suggested readings for each FAQ in the Supplementary Material and emphasise the continual learning that underpins policy-engaged marine research. Whilst we hope this guidance can help individual ECRs increase the likelihood of impact, it is not a recipe for every situation and benefits from leverage beyond individual efforts into supervision/mentorship, project management, labs, research organisations, and funding bodies to realise the full capacity of ECRs contributing to evidence-informed marine governance.

Conflict of Interests

In this article, editorial decisions were undertaken by Annette Breckwoldt (Leibniz Centre for Tropical Marine Research), Asha de Vos (Oceanswell / University of Western Australia Oceans Institute), Leonie Dziomba (Leibniz Centre for Tropical Marine Research), Salanieta Kitolelei (Leibniz Centre for Tropical Marine Research / University of the South Pacific), and Sangeeta Mangubhai (Talanoa Consulting).

Supplementary Material

Supplementary material for this article is available online in the format provided by the authors (unedited).

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About the Authors

Denis Karcher is a postdoctoral researcher in the Anthropocene Laboratory at the Royal Swedish Academy of Sciences. The core of his research is on science–policy–society interfaces, evidence-informed environmental management, research impact, and perceptions of environmental and social change.

Christopher Cvitanovic is a transdisciplinary marine scientist at UNSW Canberra and deputy director of the UNSW Centre for Marine Science and Innovation. His research is focused on advancing the theory and practice of knowledge exchange at the interface of science and policy to support the governance of marine systems.

Melanie Austen is professor of ocean and society at the University of Plymouth. Her research takes a systems thinking approach towards achieving sustainable marine ecosystems, embracing natural capital and ecosystem services, blue economy, governance, human health, and interactions between terrestrial and marine systems. She has served on UK government committees and boards.

Aislinn Dunne (PhD) is a marine ecologist and conservationist. Her research focuses on understanding ecosystem functioning, connectivity, and anthropogenic stressors in coastal environments.

Louisa Evans is professor of environment and development at the University of Exeter. She is an interdisciplinary environmental social scientist working primarily in marine and coastal systems. Louisa's research aims to improve the resilience and human wellbeing of resource-dependent and vulnerable peoples and communities, in ways that are socially just and environmentally sustainable. Beyond her research, her roles within the University of Exeter are focused on supporting post-graduate, post-doctoral, and early-career researchers with their professional development, careers, and wellbeing.

Rebecca Gruby (PhD) is the Robert K. Johnson professor of marine conservation and director of the Robert K. Johnson Center for Marine Conservation at the University of Miami. She is an interdisciplinary social scientist whose research focuses on marine conservation and governance with the goal of advancing ocean sustainability and human well-being.

Nicole Malinconico is a biologist and holds a PhD in oceanography. She currently works as a research assistant at the UNSW Centre for Sustainable Development Reform and the Global Water Institute, where her research focuses on ecosystem accounting (SEEA-EA), ocean–climate policy, and water–food security.

Shannon McLaughlin is currently completing her PhD in the Environmental Policy Group at Wageningen University. Her research explores how policies and institutions shape human relationships with nature with a specific focus on the Rights of Nature and marine contexts.

E. J. Milner-Gulland is Tasso Leventis professor of biodiversity at the University of Oxford. She leads the Interdisciplinary Centre for Conservation Science in the Department of Biology, and aims for all her research to be relevant to, and working with, end users. Her research broadly covers the design, implementation, and evaluation of interventions aimed at improving the state of nature while fostering social justice and equity.

Nathalie Steins (PhD) is a social scientist at Wageningen University & Research, the Netherlands, specialising in fisheries governance, policy, and stakeholder collaboration. She currently chairs the ICES Human Dimensions Steering Group, leading the integration of social sciences and humanities within the International Council for the Exploration of the Sea.