

Joint Master in EU Trade and Climate Diplomacy

Blue Diplomacy in Practice: Assessing the Effectiveness of the EU Agenda for International Ocean Governance as a Tool of Climate Diplomacy

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Abstract

The increasing recognition of the ocean-climate nexus has elevated ocean governance as an important component of international climate diplomacy. Against this background, this thesis examines how effectively the European Union (EU) leverages its International Ocean Governance Agenda (IOGA) to advance climate objectives through multilateral diplomacy and external partnerships. While the EU presents itself as a global leader in sustainable ocean governance, the effectiveness of its external action remains contested within the fragmented architecture of global ocean governance.

The research applies a qualitative case study approach combining document analysis with three semi-structured expert interviews involving representatives from academia, policy, and civil society. Guided by a multidimensional analytical framework, the thesis evaluates the IOGA across four dimensions of governance effectiveness: normative, procedural, institutional, and outcome effectiveness. Particular attention is given to the EU's engagement at the United Nations Ocean Conferences (2017, 2022, and 2025), its partnership-building strategies, and the relationship between internal policy coherence and external credibility.

The findings demonstrate that the IOGA is most effective as a framework for agenda-setting, norm diffusion, institutional coordination, and multilateral climate diplomacy. However, its capacity to generate measurable environmental outcomes remains constrained by fragmented governance structures, implementation challenges, and geopolitical dynamics beyond the EU's direct control. The thesis concludes that the IOGA should be understood primarily as an instrument of *blue climate diplomacy*, through which the EU strengthens international cooperation and promotes integrated ocean-climate governance, rather than as a mechanism capable of independently delivering global environmental transformation.

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1. Introduction

1.1 Oceans and Climate Interdependence

Oceans are central to the stability of the global climate system. They absorb more than 90 per cent of excess heat generated by greenhouse gas emissions and act as a major carbon sink, regulating atmospheric carbon dioxide concentrations and global temperature patterns. At the same time, oceans are increasingly vulnerable to the impacts of climate change, including rising sea levels, ocean warming, acidification, deoxygenation, and accelerating biodiversity loss. These processes not only threaten marine ecosystems but also undermine food security, coastal livelihoods, and global economic stability. The interdependence between ocean health and climate stability has therefore become increasingly evident in both scientific and policy communities.

Despite this recognition, oceans have historically occupied a secondary position within international climate diplomacy. While climate negotiations under the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) have gradually incorporated ocean-related concerns, governance of marine spaces remains institutionally fragmented across multiple legal regimes and sectoral frameworks. Sustainable Development Goal 14 (Life Below Water) has further elevated oceans within the global sustainable development agenda, yet integration between ocean governance and climate diplomacy remains uneven. This evolving context raises an important question: how are oceans being mobilized as instruments of climate diplomacy, and with what degree of effectiveness?

1.2 The EU's International Ocean Governance Agenda

Within this global landscape, the European Union has positioned itself as a leading actor in international ocean governance. In 2016, the EU adopted the International Ocean Governance Agenda, becoming the first major economic actor to establish a comprehensive framework for promoting sustainable, rules-based management of the oceans through multilateral cooperation and external partnerships. The Agenda was updated in 2022 to reflect emerging geopolitical dynamics, sustainability imperatives, and climate objectives.

The IOGA seeks to promote effective ocean governance by strengthening international frameworks, enhancing cooperation with third countries, addressing illegal, unreported and unregulated (IUU) fishing, and integrating sustainability principles into external partnerships. Increasingly, the EU has framed ocean governance as part of its broader climate and sustainability strategy, aligning it with the European Green Deal and, more recently, the European Ocean Pact (2025), which aims to consolidate internal coherence across marine-related policy domains.

However, while the EU presents itself as a global leader in sustainable ocean governance and climate diplomacy, the extent to which the IOGA translates normative ambition into tangible diplomatic influence and measurable climate outcomes remains contested. This tension between leadership claims and practical effectiveness forms the core motivation of this research.

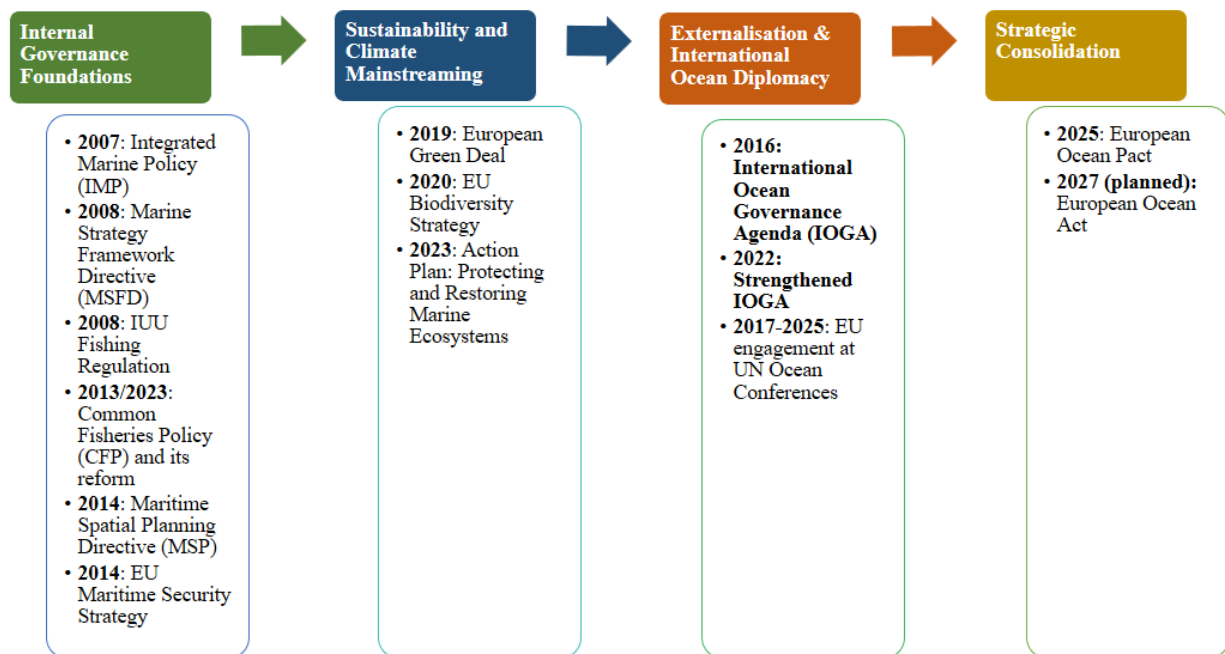


Figure 1. *Evolution of the European Union's Marine Governance Framework from Internal Regulation to International Ocean Governance (2007–2027).*

Author's own compilation based on sources listed in the order in which the policy instruments appear in Figure 1 (left to right; within each column, top to bottom): European Commission (2007); European Parliament and Council of the European Union (2008); Council of the European Union (2008); European Parliament and Council of the European Union (2013); European Commission (2023a); European Parliament and Council of the European Union (2014); Council of the European Union (2014); European Commission (n.d.); European Commission (2020); European Commission (2023b); European Commission and High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy (2016); European Commission and High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy (2022); United Nations Ocean Conferences (2017, 2022, 2025); European Commission (2025); and European Parliamentary Research Service (2025).

The trajectory of EU marine governance reveals a progressive externalization dynamic rooted in internal regulatory capacity. What began as sectoral coordination through instruments such as the Integrated Maritime Policy and the Marine Strategy Framework Directive gradually evolved into climate-integrated sustainability frameworks and, ultimately, into structured external engagement through the IOGA. The European Ocean Pact reflects a further stage in this development, seeking to consolidate internal regulatory frameworks and external ocean diplomacy into a unified strategic architecture. The announced Ocean Act, expected by 2027, signals an additional phase of strategic-legislative consolidation by aiming to integrate existing ocean-related targets into a more coherent legal framework and strengthen cross-sectoral coordination. Together, the Pact and the proposed Ocean Act indicate a shift from fragmented policy layering toward institutional streamlining and governance integration. Figure 1 illustrates this evolution and highlights the 2016 IOGA as a turning point in the EU's transition from primarily internal marine regulation to active international ocean diplomacy, culminating in the current phase of strategic consolidation. Understanding this evolution is essential for evaluating how effectively the EU leverages its governance architecture to advance climate objectives internationally.

1.3 Research Question and Sub-Questions

Against this background, the primary research question guiding this thesis is:

How effectively does the EU leverage its International Ocean Governance Agenda to advance climate goals through multilateral diplomacy and external partnerships?

To answer this overarching question, the thesis is structured around three sub-questions:

1. **How is ocean-climate interdependence reflected in EU diplomatic practice?**
2. **What policy instruments, including trade measures, development cooperation, and regional partnerships, operationalize the IOGA?**
3. **What are the limits of EU influence in global ocean-climate governance?**

These questions allow for an examination of both the normative and practical dimensions of EU ocean diplomacy, as well as the structural constraints shaping its external action.

1.4 Argument and Hypothesis

This thesis argues that the effectiveness of the European Union's IOGA varies across different dimensions of governance. While the EU has been relatively successful in advancing ocean-climate linkages at the level of normative and agenda-setting influence, its capacity to generate measurable outcome effectiveness in global climate governance remains structurally constrained.

Drawing on environmental governance scholarship, effectiveness can be understood as a multidimensional concept encompassing normative influence (shaping ideas and standards), procedural effectiveness (embedding issues within institutional processes), institutional effectiveness (strengthening governance coherence and implementation capacity), and outcome effectiveness (producing tangible environmental results). Applied to the EU's IOGA, this framework allows for a differentiated assessment rather than a binary judgment of success or failure.

The central hypothesis of this thesis is therefore that the EU's IOG Agenda is most effective as a tool of climate diplomacy in the realms of norm diffusion, diplomatic

coalition-building, and agenda-setting within multilateral fora, particularly through its engagement at the United Nations Ocean Conferences and related partnerships. However, its effectiveness is more limited in delivering concrete global climate or ocean-related outcomes due to fragmented governance regimes, geopolitical competition, competing economic interests, and the EU's limited enforcement authority beyond its market leverage.

In this sense, the IOG Agenda enhances the EU's international credibility and visibility as a "blue" climate actor, but operates primarily as an instrument of strategic positioning and diplomatic influence rather than as a mechanism for direct environmental transformation. The thesis therefore advances the argument that ocean governance functions as a complementary but structurally constrained dimension of EU climate diplomacy, revealing both the potential and limits of "blue diplomacy" in practice.

2. Literature review

The literature relevant to this study spans three partially disconnected fields: global ocean governance, which provides the broader international context within which the European Union operates; EU external climate policy, which situates the Union's diplomatic action within that context; and environmental governance effectiveness research, which offers conceptual tools for evaluating what "effectiveness" entails and how the EU's IOGA can be assessed. This review synthesizes these strands in order to construct an integrated analytical framework for answering the central research question.

2.1 The EU as a Global Ocean Governance Actor

The European Union has progressively established itself as a significant actor in global ocean governance. Early analyses conceptualized the EU primarily as a regulatory and market power, capable of projecting internal standards externally through trade and fisheries agreements (Bretherton & Vogler, 2008; NIȚĂ, 2023). As a coastal entity with exclusive competence over fisheries and substantial authority in environmental regulation, the EU developed tools that extend beyond its territorial waters, positioning it as a central participant in shaping international maritime governance.

One core area of EU influence lies in fisheries governance. Aldereguía Prado (2020) demonstrates how the EU has used trade conditionality and regulatory instruments to combat illegal, unreported and unregulated (IUU) fishing, effectively externalizing compliance standards to third countries. Similarly, Belschner (2015) shows that the EU has played an active role within regional fisheries management organizations (RFMOs), though not always consistently aligned with sustainability ambitions. While the EU promotes precautionary principles rhetorically, practical negotiations sometimes reveal tensions between environmental commitments and economic interests.

Beyond fisheries, scholars emphasize the EU's broader maritime governance trajectory. Germond (2018) argues that European ocean governance has evolved from sectoral policy-making toward a more integrated maritime approach, yet institutional coordination remains uneven. The development of the EU's Integrated Maritime Policy and subsequent

international ocean governance initiatives reflects an ambition to move beyond fragmented sectoral regulation toward holistic management.

At the same time, enforcement and regulatory innovation have become central to the EU's external credibility. Eliantonio and Cacciatore (2022) highlight how the EU increasingly relies on novel regulatory enforcement mechanisms in fisheries governance, including monitoring systems, compliance networks, and transnational administrative cooperation. Such instruments illustrate that EU influence does not rest solely on formal rule-making but also on implementation capacity and oversight structures.

However, the EU's claim to normative leadership in ocean governance has also been contested. Gegout (2016) critically questions the coherence of EU external trade and development policies, arguing that economic and geopolitical interests sometimes undermine sustainability commitments. This critique complicates portrayals of the EU as an unequivocal normative power and underscores the need to evaluate effectiveness empirically rather than assuming leadership.

Maritime security constitutes another dimension of EU ocean governance. Germond and Germond-Duret (2016) show that the EU increasingly frames ocean governance within a maritime security lens, linking piracy, border management, and strategic stability to broader governance objectives. Bueger and Edmunds (2023) further argue that the EU seeks to position itself as a global maritime-security provider, expanding its operational footprint beyond regulatory domains. This expansion illustrates how ocean governance intersects with geopolitical considerations.

Taken together, the literature portrays the EU as a multifaceted ocean governance actor: regulator, market power, diplomatic negotiator, security provider, and normative entrepreneur. Yet this expanded role raises critical questions about coherence, consistency, and effectiveness. While the EU has developed a wide range of instruments and ambitions, its ability to translate regulatory influence into integrated and sustained global impact remains debated. This tension between ambition and structural constraint forms the basis for deeper analysis in the following sections.

2.2 Fragmentation and Structural Constraints in Global Ocean Governance

Global ocean governance operates within a structurally fragmented and polycentric system. Fragmentation is not simply a coordination failure but a defining characteristic of how authority over ocean space has historically developed. Governance responsibilities are dispersed across multiple legal regimes, institutions, and policy sectors, each with distinct mandates and decision-making logics (Blanchard, 2017; Boyes & Elliott, 2014).

United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) provides the overarching legal framework, establishing maritime zones and general obligations of cooperation and environmental protection (Pyć, 2016). Yet UNCLOS does not create a centralized governance authority. Instead, it coexists with sector-specific regimes governing fisheries, shipping, biodiversity, seabed mining, and climate-related activities. High seas fisheries, for example, are regulated through a combination of the UN Fish Stocks Agreement, Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) instruments, and Regional Fisheries Management Organizations (RFMOs), each operating with varying enforcement capacities and geographic scopes (Blanchard, 2017). This institutional layering often produces overlap, ambiguity, and inconsistent implementation.

At the regional level, similar patterns emerge. Boyes and Elliott (2014) describe marine governance as a complex “horrendogram” of overlapping directives, conventions, and national measures. Even when integrative frameworks such as ecosystem-based management are introduced, legacy sectoral divisions persist. Fragmentation thus reflects both historical policy development and the incremental addition of new governance instruments without comprehensive institutional redesign.

Scholars increasingly conceptualize this governance structure as polycentric. Mahon and Fanning (2019) argue that ocean governance consists of multiple interacting centers of authority operating at global, regional, national, and local levels. Polycentric systems can enhance adaptability and allow experimentation across scales. Regional bodies may tailor measures to ecological conditions, while national policies can exceed international minimum standards. However, polycentricity also generates regime complexity.

Overlapping mandates, competing priorities, and uneven enforcement capacities may produce coordination gaps and regulatory inconsistency.

Regime complexity has intensified in recent years. Chen and Liu (2023) emphasize that technological innovation, geopolitical rivalry, and the expansion of non-state actors are reshaping ocean governance. Satellite monitoring systems, digital catch documentation, and artificial intelligence tools enhance transparency and enforcement capacity, particularly in the fight against illegal fishing. Yet these technologies also require interoperable legal standards and coordinated institutional frameworks. Without alignment, technical innovation may outpace governance adaptation.

Geopolitical competition further complicates coordination. Strategic rivalry among major powers affects negotiations on biodiversity, shipping emissions, and Arctic governance (Chen & Liu, 2023). Ocean governance is therefore shaped not only by ecological interdependence but also by power asymmetries and diplomatic contestation. Structural constraints emerge from both institutional dispersion and political disagreement.

A particularly significant dimension of fragmentation concerns the separation between ocean governance and climate governance. Ecologically, ocean systems and climate systems are deeply interconnected. Ocean warming, acidification, and biodiversity loss are consequences of anthropogenic climate change, while marine ecosystems contribute to carbon sequestration and climate resilience (Minas, 2019). Institutionally, however, these domains are governed under largely separate regimes. Climate mitigation and adaptation are addressed within the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) and Paris Agreement frameworks, while shipping emissions fall under the International Maritime Organization (IMO). Fisheries management remains primarily within RFMOs and FAO instruments, and biodiversity beyond national jurisdiction has developed through UNCLOS-based negotiations.

Minas (2019) demonstrates that initiatives addressing shipping emissions, blue carbon ecosystems, and high seas biodiversity fall under distinct legal architectures with varying degrees of bindingness and enforcement. This segmentation produces partial regulatory coverage and limits policy coherence across interconnected environmental challenges. The

structural disconnect between ecological interdependence and institutional compartmentalization represents a core constraint on effective governance.

Beyond institutional dispersion, fragmentation also reflects normative diversity. Governance bodies embody different priorities: economic development, maritime security, environmental protection, or distributive equity. Haas et al. (2022) argue that business-as-usual governance struggles to address cross-cutting risks such as overexploitation, inequitable distribution of marine benefits, and inadequate climate adaptation. Effective governance requires linking sustainability, resilience, and justice objectives across sectors - a task complicated by divergent mandates and stakeholder interests.

Some scholars propose normative reframing as a response to fragmentation. Pyć (2023) advocates recognizing the ocean's rights to health and resilience, seeking to elevate holistic protection principles above sectoral exploitation logics. While such proposals aim to overcome fragmentation conceptually, embedding them within existing institutional structures remains politically complex.

Taken together, the literature identifies several structural constraints shaping global ocean governance:

- Dispersed authority across multiple legal regimes
- Overlapping institutional mandates with limited coordination
- Uneven enforcement capacities among states
- Sectoral separation between fisheries, shipping, biodiversity, and climate
- Geopolitical rivalry and power asymmetries

Fragmentation, therefore, is not an accidental flaw but a systemic feature of contemporary ocean governance. Any actor seeking to exert influence must operate within this polycentric and regime-complex environment. The European Union's capacity to shape international ocean governance is thus conditioned not only by its internal coherence and ambition but also by the structural configuration of the global governance system in which it acts.

2.3 From Ocean Governance to “Blue Paradigms”: The Intellectual Reconfiguration of Ocean Politics

While global ocean governance has long been characterized by institutional fragmentation, recent scholarship suggests that deeper transformations are taking place at the ideational level. Ocean politics is no longer framed solely as a sectoral environmental issue concerned with fisheries management or pollution control. Instead, oceans have become central to debates on climate change, security, economic development, and global justice. This broader intellectual reconfiguration is captured most clearly in the emergence of competing “blue paradigms” structuring contemporary ocean politics (Bueger & Mallin, 2023).

Historically, ocean governance developed primarily through sector-specific regimes. Fisheries management, maritime transport safety, marine pollution, and biodiversity protection evolved within relatively distinct institutional and epistemic communities. The ocean was treated largely as a resource domain or environmental space requiring regulation. However, accelerating climate change, geopolitical competition, and economic transformation have expanded the scope of ocean governance. Oceans are now understood as critical to climate mitigation and adaptation, energy transition, global trade, food security, and strategic stability (Chen & Liu, 2023; Minas, 2019).

Bueger and Mallin (2023) conceptualize this transformation as an “ocean revolution” structured around four overlapping but competing blue paradigms: maritime security, blue economy, ocean health, and blue justice. Each paradigm frames the ocean differently, defines core problems in distinct ways, and mobilizes different actors and policy tools.

The maritime security paradigm treats the ocean primarily as a space of risk and strategic competition. It focuses on piracy, illegal fishing, smuggling, critical infrastructure protection, freedom of navigation, and naval presence. Within this framing, governance emphasizes surveillance, enforcement, capacity-building, and rule-based order at sea (Bueger & Mallin, 2023). The growing securitization of maritime domains illustrates how ocean governance increasingly intersects with defense and geopolitical agendas.

The blue economy paradigm frames the ocean as a space of economic opportunity. It emphasizes growth in sectors such as offshore renewable energy, aquaculture,

biotechnology, maritime transport, tourism, and seabed mining. While often presented as compatible with sustainability, the blue economy paradigm prioritizes innovation, investment, and resource optimization (Bueger & Mallin, 2023). In the European context, the concept of “Blue Growth” exemplifies this orientation, linking maritime policy to economic competitiveness (Germond, 2018).

The ocean health paradigm focuses on ecological degradation. It frames the ocean as a fragile ecosystem threatened by overfishing, biodiversity loss, pollution, acidification, and warming (Haas et al., 2022; Bueger & Mallin, 2023). Governance solutions emphasize precaution, ecosystem-based management, marine protected areas, and science-based decision-making. This paradigm aligns closely with international biodiversity and climate objectives.

Finally, the blue justice paradigm foregrounds distributional concerns. It asks who benefits from ocean use, who bears environmental risks, and whose voices are excluded from decision-making (Bueger & Mallin, 2023). Issues such as ocean grabbing, small-scale fishers’ rights, labor exploitation, human rights at sea, unequal access to marine resources, and the distribution of risks and revenues from the blue economy fall within this framing. Blue justice challenges purely economic or technocratic approaches to governance and highlights structural inequalities embedded in ocean exploitation.

These paradigms do not operate in isolation. Instead, they coexist and often compete within governance processes. For example, offshore energy expansion may be promoted under blue economy logic, justified through climate mitigation goals under ocean health framing, securitized as critical infrastructure, and criticized under blue justice concerns if local communities are excluded. The coexistence of paradigms therefore explains not only policy expansion but also normative tension.

The shift from sectoral governance to blue paradigms reflects broader transformations in global politics. Climate change has intensified awareness of the ocean-climate nexus, as marine ecosystems are recognized both as victims of warming and as potential contributors to mitigation through carbon sequestration (Minas, 2019). Geopolitical rivalry has elevated the strategic significance of maritime spaces, particularly in the Arctic and Indo-Pacific

(Chen & Liu, 2023). Simultaneously, sustainable development agendas and the UN Sustainable Development Goals have embedded ocean governance within broader development discourses (Haas et al., 2022).

Importantly, this intellectual reconfiguration does not eliminate fragmentation. Rather, it rearticulates it. Whereas Section 2 highlighted institutional dispersion, the paradigm perspective reveals ideational plurality. Fragmentation is thus rooted not only in overlapping regimes but also in competing problem definitions and normative priorities. Ocean governance becomes a site of negotiation among security actors, economic planners, conservationists, and justice advocates.

For actors such as the European Union, this paradigmatic plurality presents both opportunities and challenges. The EU simultaneously promotes blue economy strategies, marine environmental protection, maritime security cooperation, and sustainable development norms. Navigating and reconciling these paradigms requires balancing economic competitiveness, environmental ambition, geopolitical stability, and distributive fairness. The effectiveness of EU ocean governance therefore depends not only on institutional coherence but also on its capacity to align these competing intellectual frames.

In sum, contemporary ocean politics is characterized by an intellectual shift from narrowly sectoral governance toward cross-cutting paradigms that link oceans to climate change, security, development, and justice. This transformation expands the scope of ocean governance but also intensifies normative complexity. Understanding these paradigms is essential for analyzing how actors position themselves within global ocean politics and how ocean governance intersects with broader external policy domains, particularly climate diplomacy.

2.4 EU Climate Diplomacy and External Action

As seen in Section 1, the European Union has long framed itself as a global leader in climate governance. The literature identifies climate policy as one of the most consolidated dimensions of EU external action, where regulatory capacity, diplomatic coordination, and normative ambition converge (Oberthür & Dupont, 2021; Tobin et al., 2023).

Traditionally, EU climate leadership relied heavily on exemplary action. By adopting ambitious domestic legislation, including emissions trading and renewable energy targets, the EU sought to demonstrate feasibility and credibility in international negotiations. Oberthür and Dupont (2021) argue that such internal policy consolidation enhanced the EU's bargaining power during the negotiations leading to the Paris Agreement.

However, climate diplomacy has evolved significantly in response to geopolitical shifts. The perceived marginalization of the EU during the Copenhagen climate summit prompted strategic recalibration (von Lucke, 2025). Rather than relying solely on normative appeals, the EU increasingly adopted an orchestration strategy, emphasizing coalition-building, diplomatic facilitation, and pragmatic engagement.

Bremberg and Michalski (2024) conceptualize this evolution through four key diplomatic practices: narration, coordination, outreach, and mainstreaming. Climate diplomacy has expanded beyond environmental ministries to involve trade, development, and security actors, reflecting a whole-of-EU approach.

Normative power remains central to this external strategy. Dikaïos (2024) emphasizes that EU climate diplomacy is grounded in the projection of a “climate norm” centered on sustainability, precaution, and multilateralism. Through instruments such as the European Green Deal and the Carbon Border Adjustment Mechanism, the EU externalizes regulatory standards, shaping global expectations and market behavior. Yet Dikaïos also notes that normative projection requires internal coherence and credible implementation to sustain legitimacy.

Ivasechko et al. (2025) further argue that EU climate leadership increasingly integrates financial instruments and infrastructure initiatives, linking climate diplomacy with investment strategies such as the Global Gateway. Climate action thus becomes intertwined with development cooperation and economic statecraft.

At the same time, critiques highlight limitations. Von Lucke (2025) cautions that external regulatory instruments may be perceived as unilateral or protectionist, potentially

undermining trust among developing countries. Climate diplomacy therefore operates within a delicate balance between normative ambition and geopolitical sensitivity.

The growing recognition of the ocean-climate nexus adds an additional layer of complexity. Minas (2019) stresses that oceans are central to mitigation and adaptation, from carbon sequestration to maritime emissions and coastal resilience. Integrating ocean governance into climate diplomacy requires coordination across institutional domains that have historically developed separately.

In sum, EU climate diplomacy has transitioned from primarily exemplary leadership toward a multidimensional strategy combining normative projection, orchestration, regulatory externalization, and financial engagement. Whether this expanded diplomatic toolkit translates into effective governance influence depends not only on ambition but also on coherence across interconnected policy domains, including ocean governance.

2.5 Conceptualizing Effectiveness in Governance Research

Claims about leadership in ocean and climate governance are widespread in both policy discourse and academic literature. However, leadership does not automatically imply effectiveness. To assess the European Union's role in international ocean governance meaningfully, it is necessary to clarify what "effectiveness" entails in governance research.

Governance effectiveness is a contested concept. At its simplest, it refers to the extent to which institutions achieve their stated objectives. Yet this definition raises further questions: Which objectives matter? Are they procedural, normative, or outcome-based? And over what time horizon should performance be evaluated? Scholars of international environmental governance emphasize that effectiveness must be understood as multidimensional rather than reducible to a single indicator (Young, 2010; Young, 2016).

2.5.1 Normative Effectiveness

Normative effectiveness concerns the extent to which governance arrangements embody and promote widely accepted principles such as sustainability, precaution, equity, and long-term resilience. Young (2016) argues that environmental governance must be evaluated not

only in terms of efficiency but also in terms of sustainability and distributive justice. Institutions may function procedurally yet fail to align with broader normative goals.

In the context of ocean governance, normative effectiveness involves assessing whether policies prioritize ecosystem-based management, biodiversity protection, and equitable benefit-sharing. It also requires considering whether governance arrangements integrate climate mitigation and adaptation objectives (Minas, 2019). Normative effectiveness therefore captures the degree to which governance reflects evolving expectations about environmental responsibility and justice.

2.5.2 Outcome Effectiveness

Outcome effectiveness refers to tangible environmental and governance results. It asks whether institutions produce measurable improvements in ecological conditions, compliance rates, or policy implementation. Young (2010) emphasizes that institutions can influence behavior through rules, incentives, and coordination mechanisms, but their success ultimately depends on observable change.

In environmental governance, outcome effectiveness may include reduced overfishing, improved stock recovery, lower emissions, enhanced compliance with monitoring requirements, or expanded marine protected areas. However, outcome measurement is complicated by attribution challenges. Environmental change often depends on multiple interacting variables, making it difficult to isolate the causal impact of a single actor or policy (Young, 2013). This complexity reinforces the need for careful analytical criteria.

2.5.3 Institutional and Procedural Effectiveness

A third dimension concerns institutional or procedural effectiveness. This refers to the capacity of governance arrangements to coordinate actors, facilitate cooperation, reduce conflict, and generate compliance (Young, 2010). Even where environmental outcomes are slow to materialize, institutions may be effective in shaping behavior, improving transparency, or strengthening enforcement mechanisms.

Institutional effectiveness also includes adaptability. Young (2013) highlights that long-term environmental governance requires institutions capable of learning, adjusting, and responding to new scientific knowledge or changing political contexts. In polycentric systems characterized by regime complexity, procedural coherence and coordination become particularly important.

For the EU, procedural effectiveness may involve its ability to shape negotiation agendas, build coalitions, align Member States, and integrate ocean and climate considerations across policy domains. Institutional influence within fragmented governance architectures can constitute a form of effectiveness even where immediate ecological outcomes remain uncertain.

2.5.4 Integrating the Dimensions

Taken together, these dimensions suggest that effectiveness in governance research encompasses:

1. Normative effectiveness: alignment with sustainability, equity, and precautionary principles.
2. Outcome effectiveness: observable improvements in environmental conditions or compliance.
3. Institutional/procedural effectiveness: capacity to coordinate, adapt, and shape governance processes.

These dimensions are interrelated but analytically distinct. An actor may demonstrate normative ambition without achieving measurable outcomes. Conversely, institutional coordination may improve even if environmental indicators lag. Evaluating governance effectiveness therefore requires examining both substantive results and structural influence.

Importantly, effectiveness must also be assessed over time. Young (2013) cautions against short-term evaluations that overlook long-term institutional learning and durability. Environmental governance often unfolds incrementally, and transformative change may depend on cumulative institutional adaptation.

In sum, effectiveness in international environmental governance is multidimensional, encompassing normative alignment, outcome achievement, and institutional capacity. Applying this framework allows for a more rigorous assessment of the European Union's role in global ocean governance. Rather than equating leadership claims with success, this thesis evaluates whether EU external action demonstrates normative coherence, produces tangible governance outcomes, and strengthens institutional coordination within a fragmented global system.

This study adopts a multidimensional governance effectiveness framework, combining normative, institutional, and outcome-based perspectives.

2.6 Identified Research Gap

The existing literature provides substantial insights into global ocean governance, EU maritime policy, blue paradigms, and climate diplomacy. Scholars have examined the EU's regulatory authority in fisheries management (Aldereguía Prado, 2020; Belschner, 2015), its normative ambitions in sustainable development (Bretherton & Vogler, 2008), and its evolving climate leadership strategies (Oberthür & Dupont, 2021; von Lucke, 2025). At the same time, research on global ocean governance highlights structural fragmentation, regime complexity, and the ocean-climate disconnect as defining challenges (Blanchard, 2017; Minas, 2019; Mahon & Fanning, 2019).

However, these strands of scholarship remain largely disconnected.

First, studies of EU ocean governance tend to focus on sector-specific domains, particularly fisheries and IUU enforcement, without systematically linking maritime governance to the EU's broader climate diplomacy and external climate strategy. Conversely, literature on EU climate leadership rarely incorporates the ocean as a central analytical domain, despite the growing importance of maritime emissions, blue carbon ecosystems, offshore renewable energy, and high seas biodiversity in climate mitigation and adaptation debates.

Second, while fragmentation in global ocean governance is well documented, fewer studies examine how a regional actor such as the EU attempts to navigate or mitigate this fragmentation across policy domains. Research often treats institutional dispersion as a

structural condition, but less attention is given to actor-specific strategies aimed at enhancing coherence between ocean and climate governance.

Third, existing assessments of EU leadership frequently rely on descriptive accounts of ambition or diplomatic activity, without applying a systematic and multidimensional concept of effectiveness. Leadership claims are often equated with normative ambition or agenda-setting, while outcome and institutional dimensions remain underexplored.

This thesis addresses these gaps by integrating three literatures that have largely evolved in parallel: global ocean governance, EU climate diplomacy, and governance effectiveness research. By conceptualizing effectiveness in normative, outcome, and institutional terms, and by examining the EU's IOGA at the intersection of ocean and climate politics, the study provides a more comprehensive evaluation of EU external action. In doing so, it contributes to a more integrated understanding of how regional actors operate within fragmented global governance architectures and how ocean and climate domains increasingly converge in contemporary international politics.

3. Analytical Framework and Methodology

3.1 Conceptualizing Effectiveness in Ocean-Climate Governance

This thesis evaluates the European Union's IOGA as a tool of climate diplomacy. To do so, it operationalizes the concept of "effectiveness" as a multidimensional variable rather than treating leadership or ambition as proxies for impact. Drawing on governance literature (Young, 2010; Young, 2016), effectiveness is understood along four analytical dimensions: normative, procedural, institutional, and outcome effectiveness.

Normative effectiveness refers to the extent to which EU ocean governance aligns with sustainability, precaution, multilateralism, and climate responsibility norms. In this dimension, the analysis evaluates whether the EU successfully frames oceans as integral to climate governance and promotes these linkages internationally.

Procedural effectiveness concerns agenda-setting capacity, coalition-building, diplomatic coordination, and the EU's ability to shape negotiation processes in multilateral fora, including the UN Ocean Conferences.

Institutional effectiveness refers to the coherence and coordination of instruments mobilized under the IOG Agenda. This includes the interaction between internal policy frameworks (European Green Deal, Ocean Pact) and external diplomatic engagement. Particular attention is given to whether internal consolidation strengthens external credibility.

Outcome effectiveness concerns observable changes in policy commitments, regulatory adoption, partnership structures, or behavioral shifts among international actors. Given the structural fragmentation of global ocean governance, this thesis treats outcome effectiveness cautiously and evaluates whether EU influence contributes to measurable policy developments. Outcome effectiveness can also be understood on three levels: policy outputs (e.g. commitments and partnerships), governance outcomes (e.g. institutional coordination and behavioural change), and environmental impacts (e.g. improvements in marine ecosystems).

These four dimensions allow for a nuanced assessment of the EU's role beyond binary success/failure narratives.

3.2 Structural Context: Fragmentation and Polycentric Governance

EU effectiveness must be analyzed within the structurally fragmented architecture of global ocean governance. As outlined in the literature review, ocean governance operates through overlapping regimes (UNCLOS, RFMOs, IMO, UNFCCC, BBNJ), creating institutional dispersion and coordination challenges.

This thesis therefore does not assess EU performance in isolation but situates it within:

- Regime complexity
- Polycentric authority structures
- Geopolitical contestation
- Sectoral separation between climate and ocean governance

Effectiveness is thus conditional rather than absolute. The EU's capacity to influence outcomes depends on navigating structural fragmentation rather than overcoming it entirely.

3.3 Ocean Governance as Climate Diplomacy

To evaluate whether the IOGA functions as a tool of climate diplomacy, the thesis examines three operational mechanisms:

1. Norm projection: framing oceans as central to climate action in multilateral discourse.
2. Instrument mobilization: deployment of trade, development cooperation, regulatory conditionality, and partnerships.
3. Coalition-building: engagement with like-minded states, small island developing states, and multilateral institutions.

This operationalization enables empirical tracing of how ocean governance is mobilized diplomatically rather than treated as a purely environmental domain.

3.4 Methodological Approach

The analytical framework is applied through a combination of qualitative document analysis and semi-structured expert interviews. Document analysis identifies official EU framing, policy objectives, and instrument design, while interviews provide practitioner and expert perspectives on perceived effectiveness, implementation gaps, and the external reception of EU ocean governance initiatives. The combination of documentary evidence and expert perspectives strengthens the validity of the findings and enables the thesis to bridge normative ambition and practical implementation.

The document analysis focused on official European Union policy documents, communications, legislative instruments, and strategic frameworks relating to international ocean governance and climate diplomacy. Particular attention was given to documents published between 2016 and 2025, covering the adoption of the IOGA, its 2022 update, the European Ocean Pact, the proposed European Ocean Act, and EU participation in the United Nations Ocean Conferences. These primary sources were complemented by academic literature on global ocean governance, environmental governance effectiveness, and EU climate diplomacy in order to situate the empirical analysis within the broader scholarly debate. Documents were selected purposively based on their relevance to the research question and their contribution to understanding the development, implementation, and external projection of EU ocean governance.

To complement the document analysis, three semi-structured expert interviews were conducted between February and July 2026. The interviews sought to obtain expert perspectives on the role of the European Union in international ocean governance, the implementation of the IOGA, and the relationship between ocean governance and climate diplomacy.

Interviewees were selected through purposive sampling based on their recognised expertise and professional involvement in marine governance, climate policy, or EU ocean affairs. Rather than aiming for statistical representativeness, the interviews were designed to

provide informed expert perspectives from three complementary communities: academia, policy practice, and civil society.

Following each interview, the recordings were transcribed and reviewed alongside the documentary evidence. The interview material was analysed by identifying recurring themes and comparing interviewees' perspectives with the analytical framework developed in Chapter 3. Particular attention was given to perceptions of normative, procedural, institutional, and outcome effectiveness, as well as recurring issues such as implementation challenges, policy coherence, and geopolitical constraints. The findings from the interviews were then compared with the document analysis to identify areas of agreement, divergence, and complementary insight. Rather than serving as representative evidence, the interviews were used to deepen the document analysis by providing expert reflections on the implementation, strengths, and limitations of the IOGA.

Several limitations should be acknowledged. First, the study draws on three expert interviews, which provide in-depth professional insights but cannot be considered representative of the broader European ocean governance community. The findings therefore reflect informed expert perspectives rather than generalisable opinions. Second, because the IOGA is an evolving policy framework, particularly following the adoption of the European Ocean Pact and the proposal for a European Ocean Act, some long-term governance outcomes and environmental impacts cannot yet be fully assessed. To address these limitations, the research combines interview evidence with document analysis, allowing conclusions to be based on multiple complementary sources of evidence rather than relying on a single data source.

Table 1*Overview of interview participants*

Interviewee	Position / Affiliation	Area of Expertise
Katherine Richardson Christensen	Professor of Biological Oceanography at the Globe Institute, UCPH. Leader of Research Centre ROCS. Earth System Science and Planetary Boundaries Framework developer. Board, Council, and Committee Member. Chairperson.	For this thesis: Ocean-climate interactions and science-policy interface; Overall: the role of biological processes and biodiversity on the cycle of carbon in the upper ocean and how this impacts food webs and the global carbon cycle
Louis Lambrechts	Ocean governance and Advocacy specialist; Project Officer – UN and European Ocean Affairs at Oceano Azul Foundation	For this thesis: Ocean-climate nexus, EU ocean governance, the IOGA, the European Ocean Pact and European Ocean Act Overall: public international law and law of the sea and environmental law; community and environmental rights; European maritime and ocean policies, specifically fisheries management

Aliko Kolovou	Ocean Policy Officer at WWF European Policy Office	For this thesis: EU marine policy and implementation Overall: international European relations, Aquaculture and Marine Research Management, Maritime Spatial Planning and the Marine Strategy Framework Directive
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Interview data are cited in accordance with APA 7 guidelines as personal communications. Since the interviews were conducted specifically for this research and are not publicly retrievable, they are cited in the text but are not included in the reference list.

4. The EU International Ocean Governance Agenda in Practice

4.1 Origins and Evolution of the EU International Ocean Governance Agenda

The European Union's IOGA, first articulated in the 2016 Joint Communication *International Ocean Governance: An Agenda for the Future of Our Oceans*, marked a significant shift in the Union's external maritime engagement. It positioned the EU as the first major economic actor to adopt a comprehensive external ocean governance strategy, aiming to promote sustainable use of oceans, strengthen implementation of international law (notably UNCLOS), and improve coordination across fragmented governance regimes.

The 2016 Agenda emerged in a context of growing awareness of marine degradation, overfishing, biodiversity loss, and climate-induced ocean stress. At the same time, global governance structures were increasingly recognized as fragmented, with regulatory authority dispersed across regional fisheries management organizations (RFMOs), the IMO, the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC), and various regional agreements. The EU framed itself as a stabilizing and coordinating actor capable of strengthening coherence and promoting rule-based multilateralism.

In 2022, the Agenda was updated through a new Joint Communication, *Towards a Strong and Sustainable EU International Ocean Governance Agenda*. The revision reflected two important developments. First, the geopolitical environment had become more contested, increasing the strategic dimension of maritime governance. Second, scientific consensus on the ocean-climate nexus had deepened, leading to stronger recognition of the oceans' role in carbon sequestration, climate regulation, and resilience (European Commission & High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, 2016) (European Commission & High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, 2022).

The updated Agenda placed greater emphasis on:

- Climate-ocean interlinkages
- Marine biodiversity protection (including the BBNJ negotiations)
- Maritime security

- Strategic partnerships

Thus, while the 2016 version focused primarily on sustainability and legal implementation, the 2022 update reflected a more integrated and geopolitical understanding of ocean governance.

4.2 Policy Instruments and External Operationalization

To assess whether the IOGA functions as a tool of climate diplomacy, it is necessary to examine the instruments through which it is operationalized.

The EU mobilizes several categories of instruments:

4.2.1 Regulatory Influence

Through its Common Fisheries Policy (CFP), Illegal, Unreported and Unregulated (IUU) fishing regulation, and market access conditionality, the EU exerts external regulatory influence. The “carding” system under the IUU framework allows the EU to pressure third countries into reforming fisheries governance systems, thereby exporting regulatory standards (Popescu, 2026), (European Parliament & Council of the European Union, 2013), (Council of the European Union, 2008).

Such mechanisms reflect the EU’s capacity to project norms extraterritorially, linking environmental compliance to trade access. Although primarily fisheries-focused, these instruments indirectly contribute to climate mitigation by addressing overexploitation and ecosystem degradation.

4.2.2 Development and Partnership Instruments

The EU integrates ocean governance priorities into development cooperation, especially in partnerships with coastal and Small Island Developing States (SIDS). Through technical assistance, funding mechanisms, and capacity-building, the EU seeks to strengthen marine governance institutions abroad.

This dimension connects ocean governance with climate adaptation and resilience policies, particularly in vulnerable regions.

4.2.3 Multilateral Diplomacy

The IOGA is operationalized through EU engagement in:

- UN Ocean Conferences (2017, 2022, 2025)
- BBNJ negotiations
- IMO negotiations
- UNFCCC processes

In these arenas, the EU attempts to:

- Promote ecosystem-based management
- Link marine biodiversity protection to climate objectives
- Frame oceans as climate-regulating systems

This diplomatic activity represents the clearest intersection between ocean governance and climate diplomacy.

4.3 The European Green Deal and Ocean Integration

The European Green Deal (2019) serves as the EU's overarching climate and sustainability strategy. However, oceans occupy a relatively limited and indirect position within its architecture.

While marine biodiversity, offshore renewable energy, and sustainable fisheries are referenced, the Green Deal does not center oceans as a core climate governance domain. Rather, ocean policy appears embedded within biodiversity and circular economy strategies.

This limited integration has prompted criticism that ocean governance remains partially sectoral rather than fully embedded in climate policy. The relative marginalization of

oceans within the Green Deal raises questions regarding institutional coherence, an issue directly relevant to evaluating the EU's external credibility.

If ocean-climate linkages are insufficiently mainstreamed internally, the Union's ability to promote them externally may be constrained.

4.4 The European Ocean Pact: Internal Consolidation and Strategic Repositioning

The European Ocean Pact (2025) can be understood as an attempt to strengthen internal coherence and elevate oceans within the EU's strategic agenda.

The Pact reflects recognition that:

- Ocean degradation threatens climate stability
- Internal fragmentation weakens external influence
- Greater policy coordination is necessary to sustain credibility

By consolidating marine environmental, economic, and security dimensions, the Pact aims to provide a more unified internal framework. This internal strengthening potentially enhances institutional effectiveness, one of the core dimensions of effectiveness outlined in Chapter 3.

However, the Pact's practical impact remains dependent on implementation, funding, and cross-sectoral coordination.

4.5 Internal Coherence and External Credibility

A central assumption underlying the IOGA is that internal policy strength enhances external diplomatic leverage. The EU often presents itself as a normative power whose credibility derives from domestic regulatory ambition.

But, tensions remain:

- Fisheries practices have been criticized as inconsistent with sustainability rhetoric.
- Trade policies sometimes contradict development objectives.

- Member State divisions may weaken negotiation unity.

Thus, assessing the effectiveness of the IOGA requires examining not only external diplomacy but also the internal-external nexus. Institutional coherence functions as a precondition for external influence.

This chapter has outlined the structural and policy foundations of the EU's IOGA. The following chapter examines how these instruments and ambitions translate into diplomatic practice and perceived effectiveness, particularly in multilateral fora and through practitioner perspectives.

5. Assessing the Effectiveness of the International Ocean Governance Agenda

This chapter applies the analytical framework developed in Chapter 3 to assess the effectiveness of the EU's IOGA as an instrument of climate diplomacy. Drawing on document analysis and expert interviews, the chapter examines the EU's diplomatic engagement in multilateral forums, its normative influence, partnership-building strategies, and the structural constraints shaping governance outcomes. Together, these dimensions provide the empirical basis for evaluating the IOGA across the normative, institutional, procedural, and outcome dimensions of effectiveness.

5.1 EU at the UN Ocean Conferences (2017, 2022, 2025)

Because an international agenda is being assessed, EU's role at the United Nations needs to be taken into consideration. The three United Nations Ocean Conferences (UNOC), New York (2017), Lisbon (2022), and Nice (2025), provide a structured empirical arena through which to assess the operationalization of the EU's IOGA. Across these conferences, the EU progressively deepened its engagement, moving from normative alignment with SDG 14 toward a more strategic and climate-integrated form of ocean diplomacy.

5.1.1 UNOC 2017 (New York): Multilateral Norm Alignment

The first UN Ocean Conference in 2017 was convened to support the implementation of Sustainable Development Goal 14 and mobilize voluntary commitments (European Parliament, 2017). Occurring shortly after the adoption of the 2016 IOGA, the Conference represented the EU's first major multilateral platform to externalize its ocean governance ambitions.

The European Parliament briefing emphasized that the EU framed the Conference as an opportunity to reinforce rule-based ocean governance, promote ecosystem-based management, and support global implementation of UNCLOS (European Parliament, 2017). However, the ocean-climate nexus was not yet fully central to EU discourse. The emphasis remained on marine conservation, fisheries sustainability, and pollution reduction.

From the perspective of effectiveness, UNOC 2017 primarily illustrates normative effectiveness: the EU positioned itself as a defender of multilateralism and sustainability principles, but without yet systematically integrating ocean governance into broader climate diplomacy structures.

5.1.2 UNOC 2022 (Lisbon): Ocean-Climate Integration and Financial Mobilization

The second UN Ocean Conference in Lisbon marked a turning point in the EU's engagement. According to the European Commission's press release (European Commission, 2022a), the EU and its Member States announced 52 voluntary commitments worth approximately €7 billion. These commitments targeted marine biodiversity, sustainable fisheries, pollution reduction, and ocean science.

The Commission's Q&A document further emphasized that the EU framed oceans as climate regulators and highlighted the need to strengthen the ocean-climate nexus in international cooperation (European Commission, 2022b). This framing reflects the 2022 update of the IOGA, which explicitly strengthened references to climate resilience and biodiversity protection.

The Lisbon Conference also demonstrated enhanced procedural effectiveness, as the EU actively engaged in negotiations related to the High Seas Treaty (BBNJ) and promoted science-based governance approaches (European Commission, 2022a). The EU used the Conference to consolidate partnerships and reinforce multilateral alignment.

Moreover, environmental communication from the Commission stressed the urgency of marine ecosystem protection as a climate mitigation and adaptation strategy (European Commission, 2022c).

Thus, UNOC 2022 represents a shift from primarily normative projection toward a more instrument-based and diplomatically embedded ocean–climate strategy.

5.1.3 UNOC 2025 (Nice): Strategic Consolidation and Institutional Signaling

The third UN Ocean Conference in Nice in 2025 reflects further consolidation of the EU's strategic ocean diplomacy. The European Commission's official event page highlights active EU participation across plenaries and thematic panels, with emphasis on collective action and ocean sustainability (European Commission, 2025a).

A central feature of EU engagement at UNOC3 was the promotion of the European Ocean Pact, discussed at side events focusing on aligning domestic, regional, and international ocean governance (European Commission, 2025b). This reflects an attempt to strengthen internal-external coherence- a key element of institutional effectiveness.

The EU also showcased digital governance innovations through the European Digital Ocean Pavilion, reinforcing the integration of ocean science, digital tools, and policy coordination (Blue Economy Observatory, 2025; Digital Ocean Pavilion, 2025).

External civil society perspectives further noted that the EU presented concrete recommendations and supported stronger global ocean protection measures (Ocean & Climate Platform, 2025). This indicates ongoing normative leadership efforts.

However, while financial commitments and institutional initiatives are visible, outcome effectiveness remains more difficult to demonstrate. The extent to which these commitments translate into measurable improvements depends on broader multilateral dynamics and ratification processes.

5.1.4 Analytical Assessment Across the Three Conferences

Across UNOC 2017-2025, the EU's engagement reflects a clear trajectory:

- 2017: Norm alignment and multilateral positioning (European Parliament, 2017)
- 2022: Climate integration, financial mobilization, and negotiation engagement (European Commission, 2022a; 2022b)
- 2025: Institutional consolidation, digital governance integration, and strategic signaling (European Commission, 2025a; 2025b)

This progression supports the argument that the IOGA increasingly functions as an instrument of climate diplomacy rather than as a standalone environmental framework. The UN Ocean Conferences therefore provide empirical evidence of the EU's evolving approach to blue climate diplomacy.

At the same time, structural fragmentation of global ocean governance constrains outcome effectiveness. The EU's leadership is visible in agenda-setting and financial mobilization, yet systemic change depends on broader geopolitical cooperation.

5.2 Normative and Agenda-Setting Influence

The effectiveness of the European Union's IOGA extends beyond the adoption of individual policy instruments. One of its principal contributions lies in its capacity to shape international norms, influence policy agendas, and promote integrated approaches to ocean governance through diplomacy and multilateral engagement. Rather than relying primarily on material power, the EU seeks to exercise influence by promoting rules-based governance, environmental sustainability, and the integration of climate considerations into international ocean policy (Bretherton & Vogler, 2008; Dikaïos, 2024).

The literature frequently characterises this approach through the concept of Normative Power Europe which describes the EU's ability to shape international expectations of appropriate behaviour by promoting values and governance principles rather than coercion (Dikaïos, 2024; von Lucke, 2025). Within ocean governance, these principles include ecosystem-based management, precautionary approaches, sustainable fisheries, marine biodiversity conservation, and the strengthening of international law, particularly the implementation of the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) (Young, 2016; Pyć, 2023).

The IOGA provides the strategic framework through which these principles are projected internationally. Since its adoption in 2016, and particularly following its 2022 update, the Agenda has increasingly linked ocean governance with climate change, biodiversity protection, sustainable development, and maritime security. This reflects the broader evolution of global ocean governance discussed in Chapter 2, where oceans are

increasingly understood as cross-cutting governance challenges requiring integrated policy responses rather than isolated sectoral management (Bueger & Mallin, 2023; Haas et al., 2022).

The United Nations Ocean Conferences illustrate this agenda-setting role. Across the conferences held in 2017, 2022, and 2025, the EU consistently promoted stronger implementation of Sustainable Development Goal 14, accelerated ratification of the BBNJ Agreement, action against Illegal, Unreported and Unregulated (IUU) fishing, and greater recognition of the ocean-climate nexus. These conferences also provided opportunities to announce new initiatives, including the European Ocean Pact, while positioning the EU as an advocate for more integrated international ocean governance (European Parliament, 2017; European Commission, 2022; European Commission, 2025).

However, normative influence should not be equated with policy effectiveness. As discussed in Chapter 3, agenda-setting primarily reflects normative effectiveness, the ability to shape international discourse and governance priorities, rather than direct environmental outcomes. The literature therefore distinguishes between successfully promoting governance norms and ensuring their implementation, a distinction that remains central to evaluating the effectiveness of the IOGA (Young, 2013; Oberthür & Dupont, 2021).

The EU's normative influence is therefore best understood as creating favourable political conditions for international cooperation rather than guaranteeing policy implementation. The mechanisms through which these governance norms are translated into international practice, particularly partnerships, diplomatic coalitions, and multilateral cooperation, are examined in the following section.

5.3 External Partnerships and Coalition-Building as Instruments of Climate Diplomacy

The European Union's approach to international ocean governance extends beyond the adoption of regulatory frameworks and participation in multilateral negotiations. Rather than relying on coercive power, the EU seeks to influence global ocean governance through partnerships, coalition-building, and diplomatic engagement. Within the framework of the

IOGA, these external relationships function as governance instruments that facilitate the diffusion of environmental norms, strengthen international cooperation, and enhance the legitimacy of EU policy objectives. The IOGA therefore operates not only as an internal strategic framework but also as a platform through which the EU projects its governance model internationally (European Commission, 2016; European Commission, 2022).

Unlike traditional foreign policy instruments, the EU's external ocean governance strategy is characterised by cooperation rather than hierarchy. The IOGA identifies partnerships with third countries, regional organisations, international institutions, scientific networks, and civil society as essential mechanisms for achieving sustainable ocean governance (European Commission, 2016). This reflects broader observations in the literature that the EU increasingly exercises influence through regulatory cooperation, multilateral engagement, and norm diffusion rather than through conventional geopolitical power (Bretherton & Vogler, 2008; Oberthür & Dupont, 2021).

Bretherton and Vogler (2008) argue that the EU's external environmental policies derive much of their influence from their ability to promote internationally accepted norms of sustainable development. Rather than imposing rules directly, the Union seeks to create shared standards that gradually become embedded within international governance structures. This understanding aligns closely with the concept of Normative Power Europe, according to which the EU's influence rests primarily on its capacity to shape conceptions of appropriate behaviour rather than on military or economic coercion (Dikaïos, 2024). Within the context of ocean governance, the IOGA serves precisely this function by promoting principles such as ecosystem-based management, precautionary approaches, sustainable fisheries, and the integration of climate considerations into marine governance.

The importance of coalition-building became particularly visible through the United Nations Ocean Conferences (UNOC). Since the first conference in 2017, the EU has consistently used these global forums to position itself as a leading advocate for strengthened ocean governance. Rather than presenting isolated policy initiatives, the Union has used successive conferences to build political momentum around shared international objectives, including implementation of Sustainable Development Goal 14,

ratification of the Agreement on Biodiversity Beyond National Jurisdiction (BBNJ), strengthened action against Illegal, Unreported and Unregulated (IUU) fishing, and greater recognition of the ocean-climate nexus (European Parliament, 2017; European Commission, 2022; European Commission, 2025a).

The 2025 UN Ocean Conference further illustrates this strategy. Rather than announcing entirely new policy directions, the European Union used the conference to consolidate existing initiatives through the launch of the European Ocean Pact and renewed commitments to international partnerships. Simultaneously, the EU organised numerous side events, including the European Digital Ocean Pavilion and discussions on aligning domestic and international ocean governance, which aimed to strengthen cooperation between governments, scientific institutions, international organisations, and civil society. These activities demonstrate that EU ocean diplomacy increasingly functions through network-building and coordination rather than through unilateral leadership (European Commission, 2025b; European Commission, 2025c).

This collaborative approach is also reflected in the findings of the expert interviews. Louis Lambrechts described the IOGA primarily as a strategic framework that enables the European Union to develop common positions before entering international negotiations. Rather than constituting legally binding legislation, the IOGA provides a shared political direction that facilitates coherent EU participation in multilateral forums, including the UN Ocean Conferences and negotiations surrounding the BBNJ Agreement. According to Lambrechts, initiatives such as the Friends of Ocean and Climate coalition demonstrate how the EU increasingly relies on diplomatic partnerships to mainstream ocean issues across international environmental governance rather than pursuing isolated sectoral negotiations (Lambrechts, personal communication, 03. June 2026).

These observations reinforce the distinction between normative and procedural effectiveness developed in Chapter 3. While the IOGA possesses limited legal authority, it enhances procedural effectiveness by improving coordination among EU institutions and Member States before international negotiations. In doing so, it increases the Union's

ability to speak with a coherent voice internationally, thereby strengthening its diplomatic influence despite the absence of binding legal obligations.

Coalition-building also contributes to the EU's agenda-setting capacity. Rather than attempting to dominate negotiations, the EU frequently acts as a convenor that brings together diverse actors around common governance objectives. Bueger and Rafaly (2025) argue that contemporary EU ocean politics increasingly depends on orchestrating cooperation among states, international organisations, scientific communities, and non-governmental actors. Similarly, Bremberg and Michalski (2024) note that modern EU climate diplomacy relies less on unilateral leadership than on coalition-building capable of sustaining ambitious environmental norms under increasingly fragmented geopolitical conditions.

Interview findings from Aliko Kolovou further support this interpretation. Kolovou emphasised that many recent developments in EU marine policy, including the European Ocean Pact, the proposed Ocean Act, and strengthened marine biodiversity commitments, have been strongly influenced by international processes such as the Sustainable Development Goals, the Kunming-Montreal Global Biodiversity Framework, and the BBNJ Agreement. Rather than viewing international commitments as external obligations, she described them as political reference points that stimulate domestic policy development within the European Union. From this perspective, partnerships are not merely diplomatic relationships but mechanisms through which international governance commitments are translated into European legislation and implementation (Kolovou, personal communication, 12. June 2026).

At the same time, both interviews highlighted important limitations of partnership-based governance. Lambrechts observed that although the IOGA facilitates coordination, its status as a Commission Communication limits its capacity to ensure implementation. Similarly, Kolovou argued that many international commitments remain aspirational unless accompanied by binding legal instruments and adequate implementation mechanisms. This distinction is particularly evident in discussions surrounding the proposed Ocean Act, which is widely expected to strengthen the legal coherence of existing policy commitments

by translating strategic objectives into binding legislation (Lambrechts, personal communication, 03. June 2026; Kolovou, personal communication, 12. June 2026).

The reliance on partnerships also reflects broader characteristics of global ocean governance itself. Unlike many domestic policy areas, ocean governance operates through highly fragmented institutional arrangements involving multiple international organisations, regional fisheries management organisations, environmental agreements, scientific bodies, and national governments (Mahon & Fanning, 2019; Haas et al., 2022). In such an environment, no single actor possesses sufficient authority to govern independently. The EU therefore seeks to increase its influence by strengthening networks of cooperation rather than by expanding formal competencies.

This strategy closely resembles broader developments in EU climate diplomacy. Oberthür and Dupont (2021) argue that the Union increasingly pursues international climate objectives through what they describe as a "grand climate strategy," combining regulatory leadership, diplomatic engagement, financial support, and coalition-building. The IOGA reflects this same logic within ocean governance by integrating environmental protection, climate action, sustainable development, and international cooperation into a single diplomatic framework. Consequently, partnerships become not simply complementary activities but central instruments through which the EU seeks to project its governance model internationally.

Overall, the evidence suggests that external partnerships constitute one of the principal mechanisms through which the EU operationalises the IOGA. The Union's influence derives less from legally binding authority than from its ability to coordinate actors, diffuse governance norms, and build coalitions around shared sustainability objectives. While this approach has strengthened the EU's normative visibility and procedural coordination within international ocean governance, its effectiveness ultimately depends on the willingness of partner countries and international organisations to translate shared commitments into concrete implementation. Consequently, coalition-building should be understood as both a strength and a structural limitation of the IOGA: it enhances diplomatic legitimacy and

agenda-setting capacity, yet its reliance on voluntary cooperation constrains the EU's ability to guarantee measurable governance outcomes.

5.4 Expert Perspectives on the Effectiveness of the IOGA

Table 2

Analytical Summary of Expert Interview: Katherine Richardson Christensen

Theme	Evidence (Paraphrased)	Analytical Output
Ocean-climate interdependence	Emphasizes that while oceans absorb CO ₂ and heat, biological and ecological processes operate on geological timescales, and the ocean cannot be framed as a short-term climate “solution.”	Introduces epistemic caution into the ocean-climate narrative. Challenges simplified policy framing of oceans as immediate mitigation tools. Suggests limits to normative framing of oceans within climate diplomacy.
Instruments (trade, aid, partnerships)	Limited direct reference to EU trade or diplomatic instruments. Focus instead on science-policy interface and governance traditions.	Indicates that external diplomatic instruments such as IUU regulation, trade leverage, or UN engagement may have limited visibility outside policy communities. Suggests possible communication gap between instrument deployment and epistemic actors.
Normative influence	Notes that she has not perceived the EU as a clear global “leader” in ocean governance, despite internal regulatory strength.	Suggests discrepancy between EU self-presentation and external expert perception. Points to moderate normative effectiveness: EU frames sustainability strongly

		but does not dominate global ocean discourse symbolically.
Structural limits	Highlights jurisdictional complexity, fragmented governance structures, geopolitical shifts, and multilevel coordination challenges.	Reinforces literature on regime complexity and polycentric governance. Supports argument that EU effectiveness is structurally bounded rather than politically deficient.
Perceived effectiveness	Suggests EU governance strong internally but less visible globally; societal and geopolitical drivers shape ocean agenda more than EU diplomacy alone.	Supports thesis hypothesis: EU most effective in institutional and normative domains internally; more limited in outcome effectiveness globally.

Table 3

Analytical Summary of Expert Interview: Louis Lambrechts

Theme	Evidence (Paraphrased)	Analytical Output
Ocean-Climate Interdependence	Ocean issues remain insufficiently integrated into climate governance. Climate considerations are increasingly embedded in ocean policy, but ocean considerations remain largely absent from climate policy and climate negotiations.	Supports argument that the EU has advanced ocean-climate integration normatively, but significant governance gaps remain. Highlights continuing fragmentation between policy domains.

Instruments (Trade, Aid, Partnerships)	Describes EU engagement through multilateral negotiations, UN Ocean Conferences, Friends of the Ocean and Climate coalition, BBNJ negotiations, biodiversity targets, and diplomatic coordination mechanisms.	Demonstrates that EU ocean diplomacy relies heavily on coalition-building, multilateral negotiations, and norm promotion rather than coercive instruments alone.
Normative Influence	Characterizes the IOGA as a useful diplomatic instrument that provides a common EU position in international negotiations and helps project EU priorities globally.	Strong evidence of normative and agenda-setting effectiveness. The IOGA functions as a reference framework for promoting EU governance preferences internationally.
Institutional Effectiveness	Highlights the evolution from fisheries-focused governance toward integrated maritime governance through the IMP, DG MARE, MSP, MSFD, IOGA, Ocean Pact and proposed Ocean Act.	Suggests increasing institutional coherence and governance integration over time, supporting claims of growing EU governance capacity.
Procedural Effectiveness	Notes that the IOGA provides strategic guidance and coordination but remains a non-binding Communication rather than legislation.	Indicates moderate procedural effectiveness. The framework facilitates coordination but lacks legally binding force and implementation mechanisms.

Structural Limits	Emphasizes fragmentation between policy sectors, Member State sovereignty concerns, competence limitations, and difficulties integrating international ocean governance into binding legislation.	Strong support for the thesis argument that EU effectiveness is constrained by institutional fragmentation and governance architecture.
Perceived Effectiveness	Views the IOGA as useful and strategically relevant but increasingly outdated due to rapid developments in global ocean governance since 2022.	Suggests effectiveness in agenda-setting but limitations in adaptability and implementation. Reinforces distinction between normative and outcome effectiveness.
UN Ocean Conferences and Diplomacy	Describes UN Ocean Conferences as major moments for elevating oceans on the international agenda and increasing political attention within the EU.	Supports the argument that EU influence is strongest through agenda-setting, coalition-building, and diplomatic visibility in multilateral forums.
Future Governance Development	Presents the Ocean Pact and proposed Ocean Act as attempts to overcome fragmentation and create a more integrated framework, analogous to the relationship between the Green Deal and the Climate Law.	Provides evidence that the EU itself recognizes governance fragmentation and is pursuing institutional consolidation as a response.

Table 4*Analytical Summary of Expert Interview: Aliki Kolovou*

Theme	Evidence (Paraphrased)	Analytical Output
Ocean-Climate Interdependence	Highlights increasing links between marine policy and climate policy, particularly through offshore wind expansion, blue carbon ecosystems, and renewable energy transition.	Demonstrates growing integration of climate objectives into EU marine governance. Supports argument that oceans are increasingly framed as part of climate mitigation and energy security strategies.
Instruments (Trade, Aid, Partnerships)	Emphasizes EU commitments to international targets such as the SDGs, BBNJ Agreement, and the 30x30 biodiversity target, which are then translated into EU policy discussions and advocacy efforts.	Shows how international commitments function as governance instruments that shape EU policy development and implementation.
Normative Influence	Describes the EU as a frequent frontrunner in marine governance, often promoting international commitments and encouraging their translation into binding obligations.	Supports the argument that EU influence is strongest in agenda-setting and norm promotion. Reinforces findings on normative effectiveness.
Institutional Effectiveness	Identifies the CFP, MSFD, MSPD, and Nature Restoration Law as the core	Indicates substantial institutional capacity and governance development

	pillars of EU marine governance and notes ongoing revisions aimed at strengthening coherence.	within the EU marine policy framework.
Procedural Effectiveness	Notes that the Ocean Pact and IOGA provide strategic direction but remain non-binding, whereas the proposed Ocean Act could translate ambitions into legal obligations.	Reinforces distinction between soft governance instruments and binding legislation. Suggests limitations of current procedural arrangements.
Outcome Effectiveness	Points to implementation gaps, including weak management of Marine Protected Areas and inconsistent application of conservation measures across Member States. WWF research found only a small proportion of EU MPAs effectively managed.	Provides direct evidence that policy commitments do not automatically translate into environmental outcomes. Supports distinction between ambition and implementation.
Structural Limits	Highlights differences among sea basins, varying Member State priorities, limited political will, funding shortages, and coordination challenges with non-EU actors such as Russia and Mediterranean partner countries.	Demonstrates that governance effectiveness is constrained by regional diversity, geopolitical realities, and implementation capacity.

UN Ocean Conferences and International Commitments	Describes the Ocean Pact announcement at UNOC 2025 and explains how international commitments such as the SDGs and 30x30 target are used to justify stronger EU action.	Supports argument that multilateral forums strengthen EU agenda-setting capacity and help legitimize domestic policy development.
Future Governance Development	Views the Ocean Act as a major opportunity to transform international commitments into binding legal obligations, particularly regarding marine protection and ecosystem restoration.	Suggests a potential shift from normative and procedural effectiveness toward stronger implementation and outcome effectiveness in the future.
Missing Elements / Governance Gaps	Identifies insufficient data coordination, lack of funding, and continued prioritization of industrial fishing interests over ecosystem protection.	Highlights persistent barriers to effective governance despite strong policy frameworks and scientific evidence.

Table 5

Synthesis of Expert Interview Findings Across the Dimensions of Governance Effectiveness

Dimension of Effectiveness	Overall Assessment	Evidence from Interviews	Contributions to Research Findings
Normative Effectiveness	Strong	All three interviewees acknowledged the EU's role in promoting international commitments, shaping sustainability agendas, and	The IOGA appears effective as a framework for norm diffusion and agenda-setting, helping to position ocean governance

		advancing ocean-related objectives through multilateral processes. Interviews 2 and 3 specifically highlighted the EU's agenda-setting role and leadership ambitions.	within broader international sustainability and climate discussions.
Institutional Effectiveness	Strong	Interviewees highlighted the EU's extensive governance architecture, including the CFP, MSFD, MSPD, IOGA, Ocean Pact, and proposed Ocean Act. Science-based decision-making and increasing policy integration were repeatedly identified as strengths.	The EU possesses substantial institutional capacity to coordinate marine governance and support international engagement, strengthening the credibility of the IOGA.
Procedural Effectiveness	Moderate	Interviews 2 and 3 noted that both the IOGA and the Ocean Pact are non-binding instruments. Coordination across policy sectors and governance levels remains fragmented despite improvements.	The IOGA facilitates coordination and strategic guidance but lacks strong implementation mechanisms, limiting its procedural effectiveness.
Outcome Effectiveness	Weak to moderate	Interview 3 highlighted implementation gaps, insufficiently managed Marine Protected Areas (MPAs), and uneven Member State compliance.	While the EU has succeeded in setting ambitious goals, evidence of concrete environmental outcomes remains mixed

		Interview 1 also questioned whether policy ambition necessarily translates into tangible environmental outcomes.	and uneven across governance contexts.
Structural Constraints	Strongly confirmed	All three interviewees referred to fragmentation, competing political priorities, competence limitations, regional diversity, and geopolitical pressures as persistent challenges.	The effectiveness of the IOGA is constrained not only by implementation challenges but also by the broader structure of global ocean governance, limiting the EU's ability to achieve transformative outcomes independently.

Together, the three interviews provide complementary rather than competing perspectives. Katherine Richardson Christensen offers insight into the scientific foundations of ocean-climate governance, Louis Lambrechts contributes an institutional and diplomatic perspective, while Aliko Kolovou highlights implementation challenges from civil society. Their convergence across several themes increases confidence in the empirical findings.

The interviews present a consistent picture of the EU's IOGA as a governance framework that performs most strongly in the normative and institutional dimensions of effectiveness. Interviewees broadly agreed that the EU has played an important role in shaping international ocean governance debates and developing a comprehensive governance architecture. However, they also identified persistent challenges related to implementation, policy fragmentation, and geopolitical constraints. These findings support the argument advanced throughout this thesis that the IOGA's primary contribution lies in agenda-setting and governance coordination, while its capacity to deliver measurable environmental outcomes remains more limited.

5.5 Structural Limits and Geopolitical Constraints

The preceding analysis demonstrates that the European Union has established itself as an influential actor in international ocean governance through agenda-setting, norm diffusion, and multilateral diplomacy. However, the effectiveness of the IOGA remains conditioned by structural constraints that extend beyond the EU's direct control. As discussed in Chapter 3, governance effectiveness is not determined solely by the quality of policy design or institutional ambition, but also by the broader political and institutional environment within which governance operates. In the case of global ocean governance, fragmented institutional arrangements, competing geopolitical interests, and the voluntary nature of international cooperation continue to limit the EU's ability to translate normative leadership into consistent governance outcomes.

A recurring theme throughout the literature is the fragmented character of global ocean governance. Rather than being governed through a single comprehensive institution, ocean governance consists of a complex network of international conventions, regional fisheries management organisations (RFMOs), sectoral agreements, and national jurisdictions that frequently overlap without effective coordination (Blanchard, 2017; Mahon & Fanning, 2019; Haas et al., 2022). Although the IOGA explicitly seeks to promote greater coherence among these institutions, the European Union possesses only limited authority to reform the global governance architecture itself. Consequently, many implementation challenges arise not from deficiencies within EU policy but from the institutional complexity of the international system.

These structural limitations are further reinforced by the distribution of competences within the European Union. While the Union enjoys exclusive competence in areas such as the conservation of marine biological resources under the Common Fisheries Policy, broader questions of environmental policy, maritime security, development cooperation, and foreign affairs remain shared with Member States. Effective international ocean diplomacy therefore requires continuous coordination between EU institutions and national governments, whose political priorities do not always align. As Young (2010) argues more generally, environmental governance outcomes depend not only on institutional design but also on the interaction between multiple governance levels and actors. The EU's external

effectiveness is therefore partly contingent upon maintaining internal coherence before engaging internationally.

The interviews strongly reinforce this interpretation. Louis Lambrechts emphasised that the IOGA primarily functions as a coordination framework, enabling the European Union to develop common positions for international negotiations while remaining constrained by its status as a non-binding Commission Communication (Lambrechts, personal communication, 03. June 2026). Similarly, Aliko Kolovou highlighted that many ambitious commitments continue to face implementation challenges because legal obligations, funding mechanisms, and Member State priorities do not always develop at the same pace (Kolovou, personal communication, 12. June 2026). Both interviewees therefore distinguished between successful policy coordination and effective implementation, supporting the distinction between procedural and outcome effectiveness developed in Chapter 3.

Beyond institutional fragmentation, geopolitical developments increasingly shape the prospects of international ocean governance. Contemporary ocean politics is characterised by growing strategic competition over marine resources, critical infrastructure, maritime security, and the emerging blue economy. Bueger and Edmunds (2023) argue that the oceans have become an increasingly important geopolitical space in which environmental objectives coexist with strategic and security considerations. Similarly, Germond and Germond-Duret (2016) note that maritime governance can no longer be separated from broader questions of international security and geopolitical stability.

These developments complicate the EU's reliance on normative diplomacy. While the Union consistently promotes multilateral cooperation and rules-based governance, other major maritime powers may prioritise strategic autonomy, economic interests, or geopolitical influence over environmental commitments. Such differences reduce the EU's ability to secure broad international consensus and limit the effectiveness of voluntary governance mechanisms. As a result, the success of the IOGA frequently depends upon the willingness of external partners to adopt and implement governance principles that the EU itself cannot enforce.

A further limitation concerns the non-binding character of many EU external governance instruments. Unlike internal legislation such as the Marine Strategy Framework Directive or the Common Fisheries Policy, the IOGA and the recently adopted European Ocean Pact function primarily as strategic policy frameworks rather than legally enforceable instruments. While they facilitate coordination, agenda-setting, and political commitment, implementation ultimately depends upon subsequent legislative action, financial support, and voluntary cooperation. The proposed European Ocean Act therefore represents a potentially significant development by seeking to strengthen legal coherence across existing policy frameworks and improve implementation capacity.

The interviews suggest that this transition from strategic coordination towards stronger legal integration is widely recognised within both policy and civil society communities. Lambrechts described the Ocean Pact as an important step in consolidating existing initiatives but argued that continued governance fragmentation necessitates further institutional development (Lambrechts, personal communication, 03. June 2026). Kolovou similarly viewed the proposed Ocean Act as an opportunity to translate international commitments into more coherent domestic implementation, particularly regarding marine biodiversity protection and ecosystem restoration (Kolovou, personal communication, 12. June 2026).

Finally, interviewee Christensen introduces an additional perspective by questioning whether policy ambition alone is sufficient to address the complexity of ocean-climate interactions. Katherine Richardson Christensen emphasised that scientific understanding of marine ecosystems requires long-term perspectives that do not always align with political decision-making cycles (Richardson Christensen, personal communication, 20. February 2026). This observation highlights a broader challenge facing climate diplomacy: ambitious political narratives must remain consistent with scientific uncertainty and ecological complexity if they are to retain credibility over time.

Taken together, the evidence indicates that many of the limitations facing the IOGA originate not from shortcomings of the Agenda itself, but from the governance environment within which it operates. Fragmented institutions, shared competences, geopolitical

competition, uneven implementation, and the predominance of voluntary cooperation all constrain the EU's capacity to generate transformative environmental outcomes independently. Nevertheless, these findings should not be interpreted as evidence of policy failure. Rather, they demonstrate that effectiveness in global ocean governance is inherently relational and contingent upon cooperation among a diverse range of international actors. Consequently, the IOGA is most accurately understood as a framework that strengthens coordination, promotes common governance norms, and facilitates international cooperation, while remaining structurally constrained in its capacity to deliver measurable outcomes on its own.

5.6 Synthesis of the Effectiveness of the International Ocean Governance Agenda

The preceding analysis has examined the effectiveness of the IOGA across multiple empirical dimensions, including multilateral diplomacy, normative influence, partnerships, expert perspectives, and structural constraints. Bringing these findings together, Table 6 provides an integrated assessment of the IOGA according to the four dimensions of governance effectiveness introduced in Chapter 3. This synthesis demonstrates that the EU's performance varies across the different dimensions, highlighting both the strengths and limitations of the IOGA as an instrument of climate diplomacy.

Table 6

Overall Assessment of the Effectiveness of the International Ocean Governance Agenda Across the Four Dimensions of Governance Effectiveness

Effectiveness dimension	Evaluation criteria	Main empirical evidence	Overall assessment	Key limitation
Normative	Norm diffusion, ocean-climate framing, promotion of	IOGA communications, UN Ocean Conferences, interview findings	Strong	Limited ability to ensure implementation

	multilateral principles			
Procedural	Agenda-setting, coalition-building, diplomatic coordination	UNOC participation, BBNJ negotiations, partnerships, interviews	Moderate-Strong	Fragmented multilateral processes
Institutional	Internal coherence, policy integration, implementation capacity	European Green Deal, Ocean Pact, proposed Ocean Act	Strong but developing	Dependent on Member State implementation
Outcome	Governance outputs, behavioural change, environmental impacts	Commitments, funding, regulatory adoption, marine indicators	Limited/Mixed	Attribution and long-term environmental change

As shown in Table 6, the IOGA performs most strongly in the normative and institutional dimensions of effectiveness. The EU has successfully promoted the ocean-climate nexus, strengthened policy coordination, and positioned itself as a central actor in multilateral ocean governance. Procedural effectiveness is also evident through agenda-setting and coalition-building, although coordination remains constrained by the fragmented nature of international ocean governance. By contrast, outcome effectiveness remains more limited. While the EU has generated important policy outputs, including political commitments, partnerships, and funding initiatives, the translation of these achievements into measurable governance outcomes and environmental improvements depends on broader implementation processes and international cooperation beyond the EU's direct control.

6. Discussion

The preceding analysis demonstrates that the effectiveness of the European Union's IOGA cannot be understood through a simple distinction between success and failure. Instead, the findings support the multidimensional understanding of governance effectiveness developed in Chapter 3. While the IOGA has significantly strengthened the European Union's capacity to shape international norms, coordinate multilateral action, and promote the integration of oceans within climate diplomacy, its ability to produce measurable environmental outcomes remains constrained by the fragmented nature of global ocean governance. The discussion therefore interprets these findings through the analytical framework of normative, procedural, institutional, and outcome effectiveness.

6.1 Explaining the Effectiveness of the IOGA

The findings of this thesis demonstrate that the effectiveness of the European Union's IOGA cannot be assessed through a single measure of success. Instead, they support the multidimensional understanding of governance effectiveness advanced by Young (2010; 2016), according to which governance arrangements may perform differently across normative, procedural, institutional, and outcome dimensions. The synthesis presented in Table 6 illustrates this variation and reinforces the argument that effectiveness should be understood as a spectrum rather than a binary distinction between success and failure.

The empirical analysis indicates that the IOGA performs most strongly in the normative and institutional dimensions of effectiveness. Normatively, the EU has successfully positioned the ocean-climate nexus within international political discourse, promoted principles of multilateralism and ecosystem-based management, and contributed to strengthening the international visibility of ocean governance through successive United Nations Ocean Conferences and related diplomatic initiatives. These findings support existing scholarship that characterises the European Union as a normative actor capable of shaping international governance agendas through diplomacy, regulatory influence, and coalition-building rather than through coercive power.

Institutionally, the findings demonstrate a gradual strengthening of coherence between the EU's internal marine governance architecture and its external diplomatic action. The

evolution from the Integrated Maritime Policy to the European Ocean Pact and the proposed European Ocean Act suggests increasing recognition that effective external leadership depends upon credible and coherent internal governance. Rather than creating entirely new policy objectives, these initiatives consolidate existing governance structures and improve coordination across policy domains. The expert interviews reinforce this interpretation, with interviewees consistently describing the IOGA as an important strategic framework that facilitates coordination and strengthens the EU's capacity to act coherently in international negotiations.

The findings also indicate moderately strong procedural effectiveness, particularly in relation to agenda-setting, coalition-building, and diplomatic coordination. The EU has consistently used multilateral forums to promote integrated ocean governance, build partnerships with like-minded states, and strengthen cooperation with international organisations and civil society. This suggests that the IOGA's principal diplomatic value lies less in its legal status than in its capacity to organise collective action and establish common governance priorities. In this sense, procedural effectiveness reflects the EU's ability to influence how international discussions are conducted, even where it cannot determine their final outcomes.

By contrast, outcome effectiveness remains considerably more limited. Importantly, the empirical findings suggest that different types of outcomes should be distinguished. The IOGA has generated substantial policy outputs, including political declarations, voluntary commitments, financial initiatives, and new partnerships. It has also contributed to broader governance outcomes, such as improved policy coordination, stronger integration of ocean and climate issues, and enhanced international cooperation. However, there is currently limited evidence that these developments have translated into measurable environmental impacts, such as demonstrable improvements in marine biodiversity, fisheries sustainability, or ecosystem resilience. Such impacts depend upon implementation by Member States and international partners, as well as broader geopolitical and institutional conditions that extend beyond the EU's direct control.

Taken together, these findings reinforce the central argument of this thesis: the effectiveness of the IOGA is shaped not only by the quality of the EU's policies but also by

the fragmented and polycentric governance environment within which they operate. Rather than indicating policy failure, the comparatively weaker outcome effectiveness reflects the structural realities of international ocean governance, where environmental change is contingent upon long-term cooperation among multiple actors. The IOGA is therefore most appropriately understood as a governance framework that enhances the EU's normative influence, institutional coordination, and diplomatic capacity, while its contribution to measurable environmental change necessarily remains indirect and mediated through wider international processes.

6.2 Ocean Governance as Climate Diplomacy

A second important finding concerns the evolving relationship between ocean governance and climate diplomacy. Traditionally, these policy domains developed separately, with oceans primarily addressed through fisheries management and maritime law, while climate diplomacy focused on emissions reductions and energy transitions. The analysis demonstrates that the IOGA increasingly bridges these previously distinct governance areas.

Rather than treating oceans exclusively as environmental assets, the European Union now frames them as essential components of climate resilience, biodiversity protection, sustainable development, and geopolitical stability. The progression observed across the three United Nations Ocean Conferences illustrates this shift particularly clearly. While the 2017 conference largely reflected traditional marine governance priorities, the conferences in Lisbon and Nice increasingly positioned oceans within broader climate and sustainability debates.

This evolution suggests that the IOGA has become an important diplomatic instrument for mainstreaming ocean issues within wider international climate governance. Rather than replacing existing climate diplomacy, ocean governance has emerged as a complementary dimension of the EU's broader external climate strategy. In this sense, the findings support the argument that "blue diplomacy" represents an expansion rather than a transformation of EU climate diplomacy.

6.3 The Limits of EU Leadership

Although the findings broadly support claims regarding the European Union's leadership in international ocean governance, they also demonstrate that such leadership operates within significant institutional and geopolitical constraints. Rather than exercising hierarchical authority, the EU's influence depends fundamentally on its ability to coordinate, persuade, and facilitate cooperation among a diverse range of international actors. Unlike domestic environmental governance, global ocean governance lacks a central enforcement mechanism capable of ensuring compliance across jurisdictions. Consequently, the effectiveness of the IOGA is inherently shaped by the willingness of partner countries, international organisations, and Member States to translate shared commitments into concrete action.

This governance context helps explain why the EU's greatest strengths lie in normative, procedural, and institutional effectiveness rather than in the direct achievement of environmental outcomes. Through agenda-setting, coalition-building, and diplomatic engagement, the EU has successfully promoted the integration of ocean and climate issues within multilateral governance processes. However, the empirical findings, particularly the expert interviews, also reveal persistent implementation gaps, fragmented governance structures, competing political priorities, and geopolitical tensions that limit the translation of political commitments into measurable environmental improvements. These constraints do not necessarily indicate shortcomings of the IOGA itself but rather reflect the realities of governing complex transboundary environmental issues within a fragmented international system.

The findings therefore challenge simplified portrayals of the European Union as either a fully successful global leader or an ineffective normative actor. Instead, they suggest that EU leadership should be understood as facilitative rather than hierarchical, with its effectiveness depending on the broader institutional and political environment in which it operates. Rather than imposing solutions, the EU contributes by strengthening cooperation, promoting common norms, and supporting the development of more coherent governance arrangements. In this sense, the IOGA's principal contribution lies in enhancing the

conditions under which collective action can occur, even if responsibility for implementation and environmental outcomes ultimately extends beyond the European Union itself.

6.4 Implications for EU External Action

The findings of this thesis suggest that improving the effectiveness of the IOGA depends less on the creation of additional policy instruments than on strengthening the implementation, coordination, and external coherence of existing initiatives. While the European Union has established a comprehensive governance architecture and demonstrated considerable normative leadership, the analysis indicates that future progress will depend on translating political ambition into more consistent governance outcomes. Based on the empirical findings and the broader literature, three principal policy implications emerge.

First, the EU should strengthen monitoring and implementation mechanisms associated with the IOGA and its international partnerships. Although the Agenda has successfully promoted international commitments and cooperation, implementation remains uneven across governance levels and among international partners. Developing clearer monitoring frameworks, regular progress assessments, and stronger reporting mechanisms would improve transparency and accountability while enabling the EU to evaluate the effectiveness of its external ocean governance more systematically. Such measures would not necessarily require legally binding obligations but could strengthen follow-up and encourage greater policy implementation among participating actors.

Second, the European Ocean Pact and the proposed European Ocean Act should be used to reinforce the coherence between the EU's internal marine governance and its external diplomatic action. The findings demonstrate that the credibility of EU ocean diplomacy depends upon the consistency of its domestic policies. Improving coordination across policy sectors, including fisheries, biodiversity, maritime security, climate policy, and external relations, would strengthen the EU's capacity to project a coherent governance model internationally. Greater internal coherence would also enhance the Union's

legitimacy when promoting sustainable ocean governance through multilateral institutions and international partnerships.

Third, ocean governance should become more systematically integrated into the EU's broader climate diplomacy and external partnership instruments. As the ocean-climate nexus becomes increasingly recognised within international environmental governance, the EU has an opportunity to strengthen its role as a *blue climate diplomat* by linking ocean governance more closely with climate finance, development cooperation, capacity-building initiatives, and regional partnership programmes. Such an integrated approach would enable the EU to support implementation beyond its own jurisdiction while reinforcing the mutually reinforcing relationship between ocean protection, climate mitigation, and climate adaptation.

Taken together, these recommendations do not advocate a fundamental redesign of the IOGA. Rather, they suggest that its future effectiveness will depend upon consolidating existing governance initiatives, improving implementation and policy coherence, and strengthening international partnerships. In doing so, the European Union would be better positioned to translate its normative leadership into more durable governance outcomes while continuing to shape the evolution of international ocean governance.

7. Conclusion

This thesis set out to examine how effectively the European Union leverages its IOGA to advance climate objectives through multilateral diplomacy and external partnerships. Situated at the intersection of global ocean governance, climate diplomacy, and governance effectiveness research, the study sought to move beyond assumptions of EU leadership by evaluating the IOGA through four dimensions of effectiveness: normative, procedural, institutional, and outcome effectiveness.

Drawing upon document analysis and expert interviews, the research demonstrates that the IOGA has become an increasingly important instrument of EU climate diplomacy. The findings show that the Agenda has strengthened the Union's ability to promote the ocean–climate nexus within international governance, coordinate partnerships, and reinforce multilateral cooperation through forums such as the United Nations Ocean Conferences. At the same time, the analysis demonstrates that the effectiveness of the IOGA differs substantially across governance dimensions. While the EU performs strongly in agenda-setting, norm diffusion, and institutional coordination, its capacity to generate measurable environmental outcomes remains constrained by the fragmented, polycentric, and politically contested nature of global ocean governance.

Rather than supporting a binary assessment of success or failure, the findings therefore confirm that the effectiveness of the IOGA is conditional. The Agenda succeeds primarily as a diplomatic framework that strengthens coordination, facilitates cooperation, and enhances the European Union's credibility as an international actor. However, it cannot by itself overcome structural limitations embedded within global governance arrangements or ensure implementation beyond the Union's own regulatory reach.

7.1 Answer to Research Question

The central research question asked how effectively the European Union leverages the IOGA to advance climate goals through multilateral diplomacy and external partnerships.

The findings suggest that the IOGA is effective primarily as a governance and diplomatic instrument rather than as a mechanism for direct environmental transformation. Through

successive updates of the Agenda, participation in the United Nations Ocean Conferences, and the development of initiatives such as the European Ocean Pact, the EU has successfully integrated oceans more firmly into international climate governance. This has enhanced the Union's normative influence, strengthened diplomatic coordination, and expanded partnerships linking marine governance with broader sustainability objectives.

However, the research also demonstrates that governance effectiveness declines when assessed through environmental outcomes. Fragmented institutional arrangements, overlapping legal regimes, geopolitical competition, and the voluntary nature of many international commitments limit the EU's ability to translate diplomatic leadership into measurable ecological improvements. Consequently, the effectiveness of the IOGA lies less in producing immediate environmental change than in shaping the governance conditions under which such change may eventually occur.

7.2 The EU as a Blue Climate Diplomat

One of the broader contributions of this thesis is the conceptualization of the European Union as a "blue climate diplomat." While previous scholarship has often examined ocean governance and climate diplomacy as separate fields, the findings indicate that these policy domains are becoming increasingly interconnected.

The IOGA demonstrates how ocean governance has evolved from a primarily environmental and maritime policy into an important component of EU external action. By linking marine biodiversity, sustainable fisheries, climate resilience, development cooperation, and multilateral governance, the European Union increasingly uses oceans as a platform through which broader climate objectives are pursued.

At the same time, this role remains fundamentally different from traditional geopolitical leadership. The EU's influence depends largely on its capacity to coordinate actors, promote international norms, and build coalitions rather than to exercise coercive authority. In this sense, blue diplomacy represents an extension of the European Union's broader model of climate diplomacy, combining regulatory influence with multilateral engagement and normative leadership.

7.3 Policy Implications

The findings have several implications for both European policy and international ocean governance.

First, strengthening the effectiveness of the IOGA will require greater attention to implementation alongside agenda-setting. Future EU initiatives should complement normative leadership with stronger monitoring mechanisms, financing instruments, and support for implementation in partner countries.

Second, the research highlights the importance of internal policy coherence. The European Ocean Pact and the proposed Ocean Act represent significant opportunities to strengthen the consistency of EU marine governance, thereby reinforcing the Union's external credibility. Continued integration of ocean policy within broader climate and environmental strategies is likely to enhance the effectiveness of future diplomatic engagement.

Finally, the study suggests that international climate diplomacy would benefit from further mainstreaming of ocean governance. As scientific understanding of the ocean–climate nexus continues to deepen, treating oceans as a peripheral environmental issue is becoming increasingly difficult to justify. Greater institutional integration between climate and ocean governance frameworks may therefore become an important priority for future international cooperation.

7.4 Limitations and Future Research

This research does have several limitations.

First, the analysis focuses exclusively on the European Union and therefore does not provide a comparative assessment of other major actors engaged in international ocean governance. Future research could compare the EU's approach with those of other actors such as China, the United States, or Small Island Developing States to better understand different models of blue diplomacy.

Second, the study evaluates governance effectiveness primarily through institutional developments, diplomatic initiatives, and expert perceptions. Because many international ocean governance initiatives are relatively recent, particularly the European Ocean Pact, it remains too early to assess their long-term environmental impacts. Future research may therefore revisit the effectiveness of these initiatives as implementation progresses.

Finally, the research highlights the need for further interdisciplinary work linking international relations, environmental governance, marine science, and climate diplomacy. As oceans become increasingly central to global sustainability challenges, understanding how governance structures evolve across these interconnected domains will remain an important area of academic and policy research.

Ultimately, this thesis argues that the IOGA should not be evaluated solely by its immediate environmental outcomes. Its principal contribution lies in transforming oceans into a strategic domain of climate diplomacy. By integrating marine governance with broader sustainability objectives, the European Union has established itself as an emerging blue climate diplomat—one whose influence is exercised through norms, partnerships, and multilateral cooperation rather than coercive power. Whether this model can ultimately contribute to meaningful environmental transformation will depend not only on the EU's own ambitions, but also on the willingness of the international community to strengthen cooperation within an increasingly fragmented system of global ocean governance.

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9. Appendices

9.1 Appendix I

Interview questions for Katherine Richardson Christensen

- *Could you briefly describe your current role and your involvement with ocean and/or climate policy?*
- *How much ocean-relevant topics are on the Agenda from your internal perspective?*
- *Do you see the IOG Agenda more as a strategic framework, a coordination tool, or a diplomatic instrument? Why?*
- *Which EU policy instruments do you think are most important in operationalizing the IOG Agenda externally (e.g. trade, development cooperation, partnerships)?*
- *Are there examples where these instruments have effectively supported climate-related ocean objectives?*
- *Where do you see gaps between policy ambition and implementation in practice?*
- *What would need to change for the EU to be more effective in using ocean governance as part of its climate diplomacy?*
- *How should society view oceans and what should be written about more or less in terms of oceans?*

9.2 Appendix II

Interview questions for Louis Lambrechts

- *Could you briefly describe your current role and your involvement with ocean and/or climate policy?*
- *From your perspective, how prominent are ocean issues within current EU climate or environmental policy discussions?*
- *Have you observed a change over time in how oceans are framed in EU climate or diplomatic contexts?*
- *From your experience, what is the practical relevance of the EU's International Ocean Governance Agenda?*
- *In the upcoming Ocean Act that you are working on, do you integrate the IOGA in any way? Or is it all new ideas that are not even in the IOGA?*
- *In what ways, if any, does the IOG Agenda influence the EU's engagement with international partners or multilateral fora?*
- *Do you see the IOG Agenda more as a strategic framework, a coordination tool, or a diplomatic instrument? Why?*
- *What would a framework look like that would have the combination of all of these: strategic, coordinational and diplomatic?*
- *How would you assess the EU's role in multilateral ocean diplomacy, such as at the UN Ocean Conferences?*
- *Is there anything you think is missing from current discussions on oceans and climate at EU level?*

9.3 Appendix III

Interview questions for Aliko Kolovou

- *Could you briefly describe your current role and your involvement with ocean and/or climate policy?*
- *From your perspective, how prominent are ocean issues within current EU climate or environmental policy discussions?*
- *Have you observed a change over time in how oceans are framed in EU climate or diplomatic contexts?*
- *How do you experience getting all the data/ information and positions/stances from different MS, perhaps even land-locked ones who do not care as much about ocean/marine topics as coastal ones, and being the bridge between them and the EU policymakers?*
- *From your experience, what is the practical relevance of the EU's International Ocean Governance Agenda?*
- *In what ways, if any, does the IOG Agenda influence the EU's engagement with international partners or multilateral fora?*
- *Where do you see gaps between policy ambition and implementation in practice?*
- *How is the communication between the surrounding countries/continents of the Mediterranean when it comes to ocean/marine issues?*
- *Do you see the IOG Agenda more as a strategic framework, a coordination tool, or a diplomatic instrument? Why?*
- *Is there anything you think is missing from current discussions on oceans and climate at EU level?*

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